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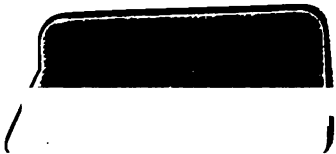
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FREDA



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F R E D A.

A *Novel.*

BY THE
AUTHOR OF "MRS. JERNINGHAM'S JOURNAL."

IN THREE VOLUMES.
VOL. III.



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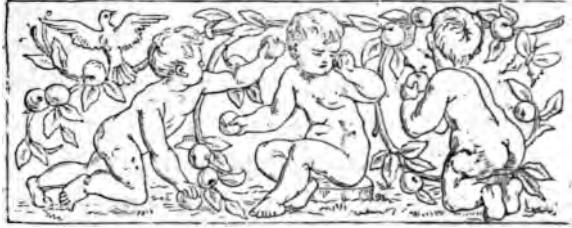
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F R E D A.



CHAPTER I.

CROSS PURPOSES.

FREDA dressed hastily, and then ran into Corabel's room, tapping gently at the door, but not waiting for permission before she entered. Miss Bell was lying on the bed, without having even removed her walking-jacket, or taken any step towards dressing for dinner. She looked so white and death-like as she lay there, that Freda started back appalled.

“Oh, my dear,” she cried, “you are ill.”

Corabel sat upright, with a frightened look in her eyes.

“No, no,” she said deprecatingly, “I am not ill. It is the walk in the sun; it made my head ache.”


“I am so sorry. I only asked you to go that you might be surprised; but I little thought you knew them before. Poor Corabel!” And she approached the bed on tip-toe, and dropped a kiss lightly on her forehead.

“Why do you pity me? Why do you kiss me, Freda?” cried Corabel; and she still looked frightened.

“Because of your father, dear; and your being sorry. Mr. Underwood says you never spoke of him to me because your father is dead.”

“Did he say so?” asked Corabel, with a sorrowful smile. “Well, never mind all that now, Freda; run away to dinner. I can’t eat anything. My head aches; but I will have a cup of tea, and then I will come downstairs, and it will be all as usual.”

“It will be better than usual, because of their being here.”



“Oh yes,” cried Corabel, with an impatient sigh; “of course it will be better than usual.”

The dinner could not help being pleasant at which three old friends met again; but the Vicar was a little silent and preoccupied.

Freda asked eagerly after Letty and Jack, and heard with pleasure of their well-doing. Maud had much to tell on this subject, and Lewes's silence was not so remarkable as it would have been, had she and Freda been less interested in what they were talking about. But still Freda could not help reverting to Corabel.

“It is so odd—so very, very odd, that you had known each other before. Everybody seems to know everybody else. What sort of a man was her father?”

Maud looked at Lewes, but Lewes's eyes were fixed on the chicken on his plate, and he said nothing; so she was obliged to answer the question, which she did in rather a hesitating manner.

“He was a very—worldly man.”

“What! Corabel's father? I *am* sur-

prised! Did you know her well?" (suddenly interrupting the Vicar); "you called her Anna."

"Yes, we were intimate at one time. She was very young, you know."

"She is not very old now."

"She is twenty-four," said the Vicar absently.

"Think of your knowing her age! But you must not go about announcing ladies' ages in that way—that will never do. Ladies of twenty-four will not easily forgive you."

Corabel came downstairs while Maud and Freda were in the drawing-room, talking about Dr. Hilton. She glided in, and sitting down near one of the windows, began to crochet. When Freda questioned her eagerly about her headache, she replied it was nearly gone.

"It was only walking in the sun," she said. "Don't you remember how I used to get headaches in Jamaica?"

"I suppose I may tell her about you and him?" asked Freda; "as she used to know you so well."

Maud Underwood laughed.

“Yes, you certainly may,” she said.

“Oh, and I dare say she knew him too, as that is the way with everybody. Did you know Dr. Hilton, Corabel? Miss Underwood and Dr. Hilton are engaged to be married; they are to be married in the autumn. I know him a little—at least I met him once at a station. She is to wear white corded silk and a Honiton lace veil. He is going to give her the veil, and she’ll go off in Navy blue. She meant to go off in violet, but I tell her it will make her look too pale.”

“I am very glad; I congratulate you,” said Corabel warmly. “But I don’t think I ever met him, did I?”

“No, you never did. It was at quite a different time. We had lost sight of him before——”

“Freda,” said Corabel suddenly, “I forgot to tell you that I saw Mr. Percival at the Library, and he said he would look in to-night and ask you for a cup of coffee. He wants to plan the excursion to Lyndon Castle.”

The lovely colour in Freda’s cheeks deepened a little, and the Vicar, who had en-

tered the room while Corabel was speaking, asked :

“ And who is Mr. Percival ?”

“ He is a friend of ours,” answered Freda.

“ Is he one of the Percivals of—— ?”

“ I really don't know. He is the Percival of S——, at present ; but I never thought anything about who, or what he was, till this minute. Did you, Corabel ? Did you ever hear him speak of his family ? Has he any profession ?”

“ Well, no,” replied she, a little surprised ; “ I never did ; and, I don't know how it is, I never thought anything about it, till this moment, either.”

“ That comes of two such very young ladies keeping house together,” said the Vicar pleasantly.

“ He is a thorough gentleman, well educated, and evidently a man of the highest principles,” said Corabel.

“ Dear me, what a grandiloquent description,” cried Freda lightly. “ And here he is !”

For, while they spoke, Mr. Percival's knock sounded on the hall-door—a knock very well known to the two girls ; and then Mr. Per-

cival came into the room and shook hands with them both.

“Let me introduce you to my friends, Mr. and Miss Underwood,” said Freda.

The proper salutations were exchanged, but Corabel was struck by the strangeness of Mr. Percival's manner. He never said a word for a minute or two, and looked more like a man in a dream, than a gentleman paying an evening visit in a lady's drawing-room.

“He is certainly falling very much in love with Freda—there cannot be a doubt of it,” she thought with much satisfaction; “he often appears to forget himself for a moment and to be quite astray—such a reserved, self-contained man, as he used to seem to be! Only love could work such a change as that—only love;” and as she thought the two words “only love,” she sighed.

Mr. Percival sat down without speaking. There did not seem to be much reason why he should have come at all, if he did not mean to speak; Mr. Underwood, however, addressed him.

“How remarkably pretty the entrance into

S—— is as you come down that abrupt hill to the sea!"

Mr. Percival looked hard at him as he spoke, and did not answer immediately; then he said, with that slight foreign accent of his which the two girls had noticed at first, but which seemed to wear off as he became intimate with people:

"Yes; it is a pretty little place. I live on the other side of the cliff where the view is still more beautiful."

"Have you always lived there?" questioned Freda, her curiosity excited by the Vicar's remarks; "Mr. Underwood wants to know if you are one of the Percivals of——"

"I have only lived there a few weeks, and I am *not* one of the Percivals of ——," was the somewhat curt reply; after which nobody spoke for a minute.

It was a strange evening to many of the people present, and one that roused and brought to life many thoughts and feelings long buried in the past. Mr. Underwood had dwelt so much on seeing Freda again, wondering what he should feel when once more in her presence, how she would look,

what she would say, and what effect her looks and words would have on him. And now, all in a second of time, Freda and what belonged to her had become of minor importance, fading like a star by sunlight, in the presence of the wonderful resurrection of the past. Maud was full of sympathy for her brother, and of sudden, eagerly-built castles in the air for his future; casting furtive glances now on him and now on Corabel, but afraid to address either. Corabel sat, quietly crocheting in the window, and joined not at all in the conversation; her heart was so full, she was afraid to trust her voice. Mr. Percival was very silent too, and quite unlike himself; but nobody had an idea of what he was thinking, or whether he was thinking of anything. Only Freda, unconscious of all that was going on in the hearts around her—unaware that there were any mysteries or any sorrows, any regrets or any misunderstandings—only Freda was gay, unconcerned, and radiant as ever.

“How dull you all are!” she cried; “what do you mean by being so stupid? What is the use of our being together if we don’t speak? Mr. Percival, did you come here to

say nothing? You could have done that at home, could not you?"

"I beg your pardon, Mrs. Fane, I'm sure; I did not know I was particularly silent. I came to settle about our day to the Castle. Shall I order the drag? and is it to be Monday or Tuesday?"

"Oh, Tuesday; because" — with a gay glance at Mr. Underwood—"now we've a clergyman in the house, we can't cook a great big cold dinner on a Sunday."

Mr. Percival looked at the Vicar also, who smiled, and shook his head at Freda, and Mr. Percival jumped up from his chair, and advanced a step or two quickly towards him, but seeming to check himself, turned aside and spoke to Corabel in her window. Maud grew uneasy, and watched them narrowly.

"You did not tell me to-day you expected visitors," was all that he said to her.

"I did not know it myself. Mrs. Fane is fond of surprises, and had not told me."

"Ah! I suppose there was some reason for that."

She blushed deeply.

"What reason? What do you mean?"

“Some reason—” he hesitated. “Well, why should not I say it? I suppose that one of her visitors has—a peculiar interest—in her eyes.”

“Jealous!” thought Corabel. “And are you alone jealous, I wonder! Alas! perhaps somebody else is jealous also.” She was silent for a moment, and then answered him quietly, “Yes, I think that is very likely.”

His face became scarlet, he bit his lip, and looked moodily on the ground.

“You think them suited to each other,” he answered her at last, with a bitter ring in his voice.

“Mr. Underwood,” said Corabel calmly, “is a good man, who would make any woman happy; but I have no reason for supposing that there is anything between them.”

“No, really!” he replied ironically, though why he should speak ironically she could not imagine; then she saw that he was staring at the Vicar, and the next instant was certain, to her utter amazement, that his eyes were full of tears—Mr. Percival’s eyes wet with tears—this proud, cold, reserved, self-con-

tained man. It was incredible! She could not believe it; but so it was.

He suddenly discovered that she perceived his emotion, and spoke on impulse:

“I can’t take my eyes off that man’s face,” he said in a very low voice; “he reminds me of a—*dead*—friend—and of days when I have been happy and miserable.”

“Ah!” cried Corabel, with a little shiver, “I can feel for you; do you know—he does the same by me?”

“And I think,” said he, “we both of us feel that we can never more be either one or the other.”

“You don’t feel that,” she said; “or if you think you do, you are mistaken. You are as full of life and the power of enjoyment and suffering, as a man can be.”

“God forbid!” he cried hastily; “I have undergone enough to crush all possibility of pain or pleasure out of me.”

“And yet I believe you may be very happy one of these days,” she answered him with a little smile.

The Underwoods and Freda were conversing meanwhile, but not easily. All three were

in reality watching and thinking of the two in the window, though they pretended to be occupied with each other. And then Mr. Percival turned round and took leave of them rather abruptly. He shook hands with everybody.

When he had left the room the Vicar examined and gently rubbed his own fingers.

“ Well, if your Mr. Percival gives such a grip as that to a total stranger, I wonder what sort of pressure he bestows on his friends ?”

“ You had better ask Corabel that,” said Freda, with some malice ; “ he is her Mr. Percival, not mine.”

Maud looked at her—telegraphic messages in her eyes—to inquire if there was “ anything in it ?” Neither the Vicar nor Corabel said a word ; but Freda, for some reason she could not explain to herself, returned Maud’s glances with nods and becks and wreathed smiles.

Then she suddenly said :

“ I am very tired, and I suppose you are too, and that is what makes us so detestably stupid. It is none of it the least like what I expected or intended. Oh, I do hope every-

thing does not mean to be unpleasant and disappointing !”

She looked appealingly round her as she spoke, and seemed almost ready to cry.

“Is your headache better, Miss Bell?” asked Maud.

“My headache !” with a surprised look. “Oh yes, thank you. I think it is gone.”

“There is nothing like conversation for charming away a headache,” cried Freda ; “you certainly did seem very happy and quite well the last part of the evening.”

Corabel made no reply, either by look or word.

“Oh, do let us go to bed !” said Freda.

And everybody appeared to be quite willing to do so. Mr. Underwood looked grave, thoughtful, and a little sad.

Freda took his hand in both of hers when she wished him good-night, and squeezed it between them with all her might.

“Is that how he ‘gripped’ you ?” she cried.

When they were on the stairs, after Lewes and Maud had gone to their rooms, Corabel said abruptly, as if she could not help it :

“Oh, Freda, what a flirt you are ! I

wonder which of those two men you mean to marry !”

“ Well, I do like that !” she exclaimed, with vehement indignation, “ when it is *you* that have been flirting shamelessly the whole evening !”

“ Flirting ? What nonsense ! when he was only talking of you !”

A soft light stole into Freda’s eyes, and a rosy colour into her cheeks.

“ It’s stupid of people, if they like you, to talk *of* you. It’s much pleasanter for them to talk *to* you,” she said.

The next morning Freda rose early, and ran out of doors to bathe ; after this she took a turn on the rocky shore, and there, to her surprise, she met Mr. Percival.

“ That reminds me that I never asked you,” she instantly exclaimed, “ how it happened that you were up and out that morning at three o’clock. It never struck me as the least odd before, but now it does—so you must tell me.”

“ I often never go to bed at all.”

“ Never go to bed at all !”

“ Exactly. I am a bad sleeper ; and I

hate a bed more than I know words in which to describe a hatred. Sometimes I sleep for two or three hours on a sofa ; but I don't go to bed unless I am so tired out, that I know I shall sleep directly. And I like to sleep with the sunshine pouring into the room. To sit up till it comes, and then if I do go to bed for sheer want of sleep, I sleep at once."

"How very extraordinary! Were you always like that?"

"No," he replied; "that has been my failing for more than a year."

"And before that?"

"Oh! before that I slept well enough."

"The oddest thing is liking to sleep in the sunshine, or being able to do it. That is what a dog does. I suppose you were a dog once, Mr. Percival? But then why did the dog-nature not show itself till a year ago? If one must have been an animal, certainly a dog is the best."

"Dogs are affectionate, faithful, loyal, and intelligent; but dogs are also quarrelsome and revengeful."

"Just like men," replied she thoughtfully.
"Yes, of course, there must be dogs and

dogs, just as there are men and men. However, I think you were a good dog. But do tell me, is it the dark you are afraid of?"

"Yes," he said slowly; "I am afraid of darkness."

"Are you afraid of seeing anything?"

"In the dark? Scarcely; that is a cat's privilege, not a dog's, I think, Mrs. Fane. What I am afraid of, is what I don't see."

"I don't understand," cried Freda, with a puzzled look.

"May you never do so. When the sun shines, and I wake, I see where I am, and all about me, and know in the first instant what the world is I have waked into. In the dark it is different; and then I miss—something."

"That is very unlike me; for I love that dreamy, half-existent state, when all that is is doubtful, and you are sure of nothing, not even of your own identity—a state that can be experienced only in the dark, or in a very dim twilight indeed."

"In fact, your whole life, night or day, is happy. The enjoyment you speak of is

only known to people who have never suffered."

"Then it ought not to be known to me; for I have *suffered* horribly."

"It is difficult to see you and believe that. Still, widowhood *is* suffering, I suppose, under any circumstances."

Freda looked startled and a little uneasy.

"I don't know," she said, hesitatingly. "I'm not sure—I don't like deceiving people. Oh, Mr. Percival!" with a sudden burst, "it was wifehood that was so dreadful to me, not—not—the other."

"Ah!" he said slowly. "I don't know which is the saddest; I don't know for which you should be pitied most, except that the one, though it embitters the past, leaves the future free; while the other, if it illumines vanished days, makes happiness no longer possible."

"The best thing of all is not to have been married at all," said Freda, with conviction; "but next to that, to have been unhappily married is the best."

"Yes, if your husband is so obliging as to die."

Freda shuddered.

“*That* is the dreadful part of it,” she cried. “Do you know he was thrown from his horse and killed? I can’t bear to think of it.”

“Was he a good man, Mrs. Fane? I wonder what his feelings were as he fell; whether he thought of death—whether he thought of—*you*?”

“Ah, don’t!” she cried, as if in actual pain. “I hate to remember it. And Mr. Underwood says he really loved me. I can’t believe it. Love is not like *that*; is it? It can’t be. I hope it isn’t.”

“Mr. Underwood, I suppose, is that clergyman you spoke of—the best man you ever knew?”

“Yes,” she replied simply; “I meant him.”

“He looks it. What a face it is! what a dear good face it is! what a refreshing face for tired eyes to rest on!”

“Only think—his sister is engaged to be married!”

“Is she? Good little Maud! I am glad of that.”

“How do you know she is good? and that

only known to people who have suffered."

"Then it ought not to be known for I have suffered horribly."

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"Ah!" he said slowly. "I don't know which is the saddest; I don't know you should be pitied most, except one, though it embitters the past, future free; while the other, if the vanished days, makes happiness possible."

"The best thing of all is to be married at all," said Freda. "But I don't know what to do."

her name is Maud?" questioned Freda, laughing.

He laughed a little too; but it was not an easy laugh.

"How do I know? Well, how *do* I know?" he answered, as if reflecting. "Why, you called her Maud, didn't you?—or her brother did, or somebody—and if one looks at her, one feels she is good."

"I thought you were too much engaged yesterday to look at her, or notice what she was called."

"Was I? How was I too much engaged?"

"Talking to Corabel," cried Freda quickly.

He glanced at her as quickly as she spoke, and something like a smile stole into his brown eyes, though his big beard concealed his mouth too entirely for her to see whether it smiled too.

"Yes, Corabel," he said calmly, "is delightful. I feel inclined to borrow your words when you describe Mr. Underwood, and to say she is the best woman I ever met. What a refuge and stronghold, Mrs. Fane, a good woman is!"

“ Ah !” cried she, with *naïveté* and regret, “ I shall never be that ; I shall never be a good woman.”

He looked on the ground in silence ; but Freda was so convinced of the truth of what she said—she so entirely meant it—that his silence, his not contradicting her by word or sign, did not mortify her in the least.

“ And who is Mau—who is Miss Underwood going to marry ? Do I know him, I wonder ?”

“ You ? How should you know him ? It is a Dr. Hilton. I saw him once.”

“ A Dr. Hilton ? Oh ! really—is she going to marry *him* ? Well, why should not I know him ? He is a London physician of some eminence, and known to a great many people.”

“ But have you ever lived in London ?”

“ Yes, I have lived in London.”

“ Do you live there now ?—I mean when you are not here ? Will you go there when you leave S—— ? Where did you come from to this ?”

“ What a number of questions ! I do not live there now ; I don't know where I shall

go ; and I came from abroad. Are you satisfied, Mrs. Fane ?”

“ Yes—no. I’m not sure. I never thought about it before. I don’t know why I should now, only Mr. Underwood was wanting to know last night. I am content that people should *be*, and don’t trouble myself for anything else ; but since he put it into my head, I think I should like to hear all about you, Mr. Percival. Would you mind telling me ?”

She spoke in an easy, airy manner, as if she was asking the commonest and most usual question in the world.

“ Can any man tell all about himself to anybody, do you think ?”

“ A woman can. I could tell all and everything—then why not a man ?”

“ A woman’s life is known on the surface—a home is made for her, and there she is ; if she leaves one home for another, it is made too ; and she does not live alone. There is no difficulty about a woman’s life—it consists of *homes* ; but men are often homeless—they may be wanderers on the face of the earth, or even if fixed in one place it need not be a

home to them, and their whole life may lie outside it."

"I should like that," she cried quickly. "I don't care a bit for home—I never did. It would be nice to be homeless. What should I do, do you suppose, Mr. Percival, if Corabel married?"

"What would you do, if Corabel married? Really, I don't know—I never thought about it."

"Nor did I till the other day. I should miss Corabel horribly—more than any one else."

"Perhaps you could live with her if she married?"

"That never occurred to me; but it would be a little tame, wouldn't it? Wouldn't it be rather stupid? And she would be mistress, and he master, and then what should I be? And suppose she married somebody who had wanted to marry me?" she added suddenly, as if quite in a panic.

Again his eyes sought the ground in meditative mood; and after a little reflection he answered her, but it was only by another question.

“Do you consult with everybody as you do with me?” he said, and his manner seemed almost stern.

“Oh dear no!” she cried with disdain; “how could I? I know no ladies intimately. I am only intimate with a few men; and just fancy my consulting with them—with Mr. Jennings for instance, or Captain Bradbury, or Mr. Baron.”

And she laughed out loud, her sweet childish, ringing laugh; utterly unconscious of the charming dose of flattery she was administering to the man she *did* consult—a charming dose which he received, at least to all appearance, calmly and philosophically.

“I suppose,” he said at last, “a great many men are in the predicament you alluded to. Most of your mutual male acquaintances might present that difficulty, the having wanted to marry you.”

“That would be telling,” replied Freda gaily, and then she laughed again. There was something irresistible in Freda’s laugh; but Mr. Percival did not join in her merriment; he did not even smile.

A neighbouring clock struck ten, and

Freda gave a little terrified delighted scream.

“Oh, how could you !” she cried. “What a horrid shame ! I told them nine o’clock was the breakfast-hour—and they are *my* visitors, staying in *my* house—what will they think of me ? Isn’t it rude ? It is too bad of you. How could you !”

“Really, I am very sorry ; but I cannot consider myself to blame, Mrs. Fane. They are not my visitors, and I was not acquainted with your breakfast-hour,” answered Mr. Percival coldly.

“And now you are going to be cross about it ! However, I must run away and make my peace with my friends—they are my friends, you know. Adieu ! I cannot stay an instant longer—I must fly.”

And kissing the tips of her fingers to him in an airy, half-defiant, half-coaxing manner, she did almost fly over the rocks and up the steps to the esplanade, leaving Mr. Percival standing on the shore alone. As she left him, a moss-rose bud which she had held in her hand all the time they were talking together, slipped from between her careless

fingers, and lay at his feet. He waited till she was out of sight ; then every appearance of coldness vanished from his face—a storm of conflicting passions swept over it. He picked up the rosebud, kissed it vehemently, and thrust it into his waistcoat pocket.

“How will it end?” he cried aloud as vehemently. “Oh, Freda! how *can* it end?”

Maud and her brother had met that morning in the breakfast-room, before nine o'clock. She looked pale and wan, and her face had lost the peaceful satisfied expression which it had worn now for so many months, thanks to Dr. Hilton. The change was so marked, that Lewes inquired anxiously what was the matter, and whether she felt ill.

“No, I am not ill,” she answered plaintively, “but I could not sleep; at least, I slept too much—it was dreaming that has tired me. Oh, Lewes, what *could* be the reason? I dreamt of Lionel Fane all night!”

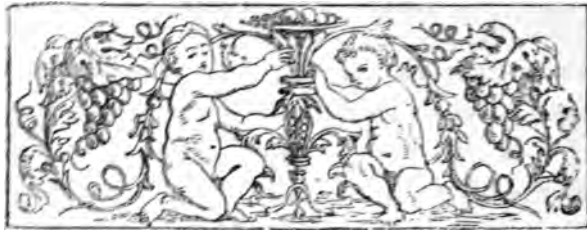
The Vicar looked distressed.

“It was seeing Freda, I suppose,” he said.

“I don't think so—for it was not of her,

or what she has made him. She was not there. I don't think I knew anything about her. It was the old days. Oh! Lewes, it was the old days. I had forgotten Arthur—I thought only of him—and his eyes haunted me, his eyes followed me about everywhere; it seems to me as if I *must* have seen them quite lately. I have not thought of them for so long—so long. Lewes, where have I seen his eyes? and why does it seem to me as if he could not be dead?"

And here, to her brother's dismay, Maud Underwood shed a few tears.



CHAPTER II.

ABOUT THE VICAR.

AFTER the first evening matters improved a little. The various members of the party assembled in Freda's house settled down into their respective places, and became more easy and comfortable. It was not exactly what Freda had intended. Somehow there was something more or something less among them all than she had reckoned on or foreseen, and she felt rather confirmed in her theory that strangers were best and most to be liked.

“It all seems a little spoiled by their having known each other before. It is not a good

plan. People ought not to know each other before," she thought.

Maud received her daily letter, and rejoiced over it, being no longer haunted by Lionel Fane's eyes; and Mr. Percival came often, and was received and considered as one of the party. Between the Vicar and Corabel there was a thin wall of ice, which was perhaps perceptible only to themselves, and to them was so perceptible that it seemed to influence every relation of their lives.

The Vicar, as time went on, looked far more frequently at Corabel than he did at Freda, and paid her many unobtrusive attentions; but he talked more to Freda, who indeed, as a matter of course, was the principal object of everybody's thoughts.

One day Freda came in with a very scornful face and a budget of news.

"Captain Bradbury is going to be married to Miss Lenox," she said. "Only think—she refused him when he was poor, and has accepted him now he is rich. Is not it horribly mean of both of them? Of him to offer to a girl who would not marry him in


poverty—fancy a man being willingly married for his money! And then, what a shameless girl, to have him now, when she would not then. What are people made of? I do wonder very much indeed.”

“In my opinion,” said the Vicar, “there need not have been any meanness on either part.”

“Oh!” cried indignant Freda. “It would require half a dozen *long* sermons to prove that, and *then* I shouldn’t believe it. What do you say, Corabel?”

Corabel blushed under the appeal and did not instantly answer. Then she said, with perfect calmness, though in an extremely low voice, “I quite agree with you, Freda; the idea of her marrying a rich man, whom she had refused as a poor man, is perfectly revolting.”

“Well done, Corabel!” cried Freda, giving her an airy pat or two on her shoulder, “and you *looked* revolted! I do like people to enter into things *so*. I do like you, Corabel, because you are thorough. Though you are so quiet, there is not one bit of shilly-shally about you.”



“Asking pardon for being so daring,” said the Vicar, clearing his throat vigorously, “I differ from you both. In the first place, Miss Lenox may not have been a free agent; her parents may have refused their consent to the marriage when she would gladly have braved poverty with Captain Bradbury. Then again, they may have been right to do so; the marriage may really have been unsuitable, while the alteration in his income may make it suitable now. But what I think most of all in a case like this—in any case like this—is, that it is taking a very low view of love and marriage, for people to refuse to—to marry—to—to be happy” (here he began hesitating and became rather confused), “because there is some punctilio about—about money—because money has in *one* manner been made to prevent their happiness—that they should themselves make it do so in another. The young people who do that are really in their way as worldly as the old who did the other.”

The girls listened to this harangue. Freda's eyes were fixed upon him, Miss Bell's were cast down, and there was a moment's pause

after he finished speaking, during which the Vicar got very red indeed.

"Well, I don't quite understand what you mean by all that," said Freda; "do you, Corabel?"

"Yes," replied Corabel in so low a voice that it was scarcely audible, "I think I do."

Lewes Underwood bent forward to catch the words, and gave a little sigh after they were spoken.

"It seems to me nonsense though," pursued Freda; "it would be as bad as refusing a man when you are rich and marrying him if you became poor, and no girl worth her salt *could* do that; but what Miss Lenox is doing is quite the same thing."

"Yes," said the Vicar, "quite the same thing; and every word I said, is just as applicable to the one, as to the other."

"If I was a man," cried Freda, "I'd rather die than offer a second time in that mean way."

"Then you would not love," replied Lewes.

"I'm sure I should though, if I was a man; I should fall in love with every pretty girl I saw."

“Then you would not allow a thing of that kind to destroy your happiness.”

“Taking it for granted,” said Mr. Percival, “that marriage ever made any people really happy, which seems to me a very doubtful matter.”

“Oh yes, there are happy marriages as well as miserable ones,” replied Freda calmly; “look at Jack and Letty.”

“It depends on people themselves,” said Maud softly, and speaking for the first time, with a little smile for her own pleasant thoughts, and an earnest sympathetic glance for Corabel and Lewes. “Joy or sorrow in marriage depends, I am sure, on the faithfulness of love and patience—in not expecting perfection in another, which you must know does not exist in yourself. But I entirely agree in all Lewes said, and I can’t see that Miss Lenox is in the least to blame.”

“Two on each side,” cried Freda; “now, Mr. Percival, yours is the casting vote.”

“If I was a Roman Catholic,” replied he, “I *might* marry a wife under such circumstances, with the idea of doing penance myself or inflicting penance on her.”

They all laughed at this.

“Ah, if we were Roman Catholics!” said Freda; “don’t you often wish you were one? I think it is such a delicious religion—I often regret I was not born a Roman Catholic, or that I never can study enough to be converted. If I was a man with a good hard head I would go in for it, and get converted at once.”

“You would like to believe in saints, I dare say, and in indulgences, and even in purgatory.”

“Believe in purgatory!” she exclaimed. “Oh, but I do that—don’t you? and you?”

She addressed them one after another, quite astonished, and was still more astonished when they all of them assured her that they did not believe in purgatory.

“But I can’t imagine how you *manage*,” she persisted; “what do you do with souls that *can’t* be in heaven?”

“Is not there another place which is generally supposed to exist, though it is not to be mentioned to polite ears,” remarked Mr. Percival rather grimly.

“Oh, but that won’t do at all,” and Freda

shook her head. "Suppose it is a soul I have known very well and haven't been *nice* to—and I know it *can't* be in heaven because of the sort of soul it is—don't you see there *must* be a purgatory, or else I should be so *very* uncomfortable—I really should not know how to get on one bit."

"And you think all the arrangements were framed with a view to *your* personal comfort?" questioned Mr. Percival dryly.

She looked surprised at that.

"No, not exactly; not only for mine," she answered; "but if I feel that, others must too."

"And you think there must be a purgatory just to make us comfortable about the souls we have not been *nice* to?"

"I think it is rather a shame if there is not. We can't behave to people as if we thought they were just going to die—there would be no use in people being alive if we did; and then if we have not done that, and they die unexpectedly, it *is* so horrid; only purgatory comes in and makes it easy."

"I think this conversation is a little profane," said the Vicar; "I am sure you don't

mean it, my dear Mrs. Fane; but I think we are not handling the subject just as we should do."

"I never can understand about being profane," replied Freda rather pitifully. "The Bible tells us so very little ever, it leaves everything almost to be guessed, and then if we guess we are profane. Why should not we say out just what we think, I wonder? why is it profane to talk about things that concern us so very much, plainly, and in ordinary language?"

"Because there *is* such a thing as reverence, I suppose," he replied, but his manner was very kind. "The Bible can scarcely be said to tell us so very little, when it tells us all things *necessary* to salvation; and perhaps we are not intended to *guess* too much."

"Then it should not set us riddles," said Freda promptly. "I never can help trying to guess riddles. Oh! you needn't mind; I don't think much about it at all. I suppose it's profane—is it?—to think much about the Bible except in Bible language; but there are some things force themselves upon one—as this thing did on me; and so I saw there was

nothing for it but to believe in purgatory, and I've believed in purgatory ever since."

"I do wish you would not talk so wildly," said Maud. "I know you don't mean any harm, but it is such a pity to get into that wild light way of talking of sacred things."

"I don't see that I've said anything wild or light," replied Freda. "People seem to be so extremely polite about sacred things that they are afraid of touching them at all; but as, after all, what you call sacred things only concern *us*, why should we treat them differently from other things that concern us? I never can understand the sort of tone taken about religion, as if it was separate from all the rest."

"I think there's something in that last remark," said Mr. Percival; "but as to the other one, you say that sacred things only concern us. Are we so very important, and are they secondary? We are told that man was not made for the Sabbath, but the Sabbath for man; and do you think God was made for man, or man for God?"

Freda's eyes sparkled, and a look of joy came into her face.

“Ah, I see light,” she cried. “I like that; I love that. It is grand to think of God and heaven in that way. It is like the stars, that people used to think were only little pretty glittering things made for our sky; but now we know they are worlds or suns or beings of themselves, and yet they give us light and are enchantingly pretty. I begin to see a little. I wish I was not so ignorant and stupid. I wish I knew more.”

Mr. Percival looked at her with an expression in his brown eyes that no one in that room had ever seen in them before, and that sent a thrill so keen as to be almost pain into Freda's heart, of a nature that her heart had never experienced till that moment since it first beat in her breast. Then he rose hastily and took his leave. Freda rose too, and when he had left the room they all saw that she had tears on her cheeks, but her eyes shone through them with a wonderful lustre. A minute afterward she ran out of the apartment too.

Mr. Underwood and Maud exchanged looks.

“I wonder whether anything will come of

it," said the former. "I think Mr. Percival is falling in love with her."

"I believe most men do that who come near her, don't they?" replied Corabel, and looked sharply at him.

Then the poor Vicar knew that Freda had told her of the offer he had made her. He felt very uncomfortable that his folly should be known to Miss Bell, and wondered greatly at that folly, now that he looked back on it from calmer days. And yet how sweet it had been! How sweet it had been when he found her in the wood, and brought her home; and when she had gathered peas in his garden that fair summer morning, and he had stood face to face with her and proposed to send her to school! What a pretty idyl! What a lovely episode in his prosaic life! How sweet it had been! Would anything else that ever happened to him—would any other happiness that could ever come within his grasp, have quite that fairy charm? Alas, no! and yet he no longer wished to marry Freda. Had he really ever wished it? And he did most earnestly desire to call Anna his wife, and he did believe that if

that desire was granted a happy domestic life lay before him, and that he could then spare his sister Maud quite cheerfully to the happy domestic life that was prepared for her also.

He looked up to meet Corabel's keen glance, and as he did so he smiled, coloured, and shook his head.

"Some men are fools," he said. "Most men are fools once or twice in their lives, but if the folly only lasts for a day or two, may they not be forgiven?"

"My dear Lewes," said Maud mildly, "what are you talking about? who is to be forgiven?"

Mr. Underwood had forgotten that his sister was in the room.

An angry pang shot through his heart, and it suddenly occurred to him that Maud was a fool.

Corabel kept quite composed and calm, and even smiled a little as she said—

"I don't understand about these sort of things; but I believe we were talking of Freda, and how every man who knew her fell in love with her, and I think Mr. Under-

wood said that they made fools of themselves."

Then Maud walked smiling up to her brother, and laid her hand on his shoulder proudly.

"Here is a man who didn't," she cried, with a little movement of his shoulder, as if she was showing him off to Corabel; "here is a man who never made a fool of himself."

Lewes would have liked to cast her hand impatiently away, and to have uttered a small oath, but he was, of course, too good a clergyman for the latter indulgence, and he was also—though that is not at all a matter of course—too just and too kind a man for the first.

Corabel's composure gave way a little, as Lewes did, by far the best thing he could do under the circumstances—looked at her fixedly with a deprecating penitent smile and a heightened colour. After a hesitating moment she said softly:

"I think Freda wants me," and left the room.

Maud faced her brother, putting her other hand on his other shoulder, and then she


kissed him. He returned the kiss kindly, though for the last five minutes he had been wishing her at Hongkong; and after he had kissed her he gently and gravely put her on one side.

“Ah, Lewes,” she said, “I am sure you care for each other still. I am sure you are going to be as happy as—I am. Dear, dear Lewes, I am so glad; you won’t miss me now.”

“Hush!” he said; “I don’t know that it will ever be. I don’t see my way to it. Her father refused me when she was rich, and now that she is poor she thinks it would be mean to marry me.”

“Yes,” sighed Maud, “I am so sorry; but I do think if you made her an actual offer, Lewes, it would make all the difference. No one knows what an effect an actual offer has on a woman till he has tried it. Now really I did not understand what I felt for Arthur—even I for Arthur!—till he offered. I did not indeed.”

“Oh yes, that is all very well; that may be the case sometimes,” replied he rather drearily; “but you can never judge from



one thing of another; everything is almost always the opposite of everything else!"

"Oh, Lewes, she *must* love you. There *can* be no difficulty. She loved you years ago, and you are in all things better than you were then; and when she finds that you have been faithful to her through this long time and never cared for another woman not the least bit, that *must* win her, you know."

"Yes, I suppose so," said the Vicar very gloomily; "that *must* win her, no doubt."

"If you knew what I felt about Arthur when I learned *that*," cried Maud, with a little glow of enthusiasm.

"You are a happy woman, my dear," he said gently. "And you deserve to be a happy woman. And I do hope and believe you have a pleasant life stretching out before you."

"And you too—and you too; it *must* be. Otherwise, why should you have been thrown with her in this way? It is so very curious that *she* should be living with Freda, and that Freda, without knowing it, should ask us here."

“Without knowing that she was living with her?”

“Don’t be silly. But, Lewes, you do really care for Anna? you do really want to marry her?”

“Yes, Maud, I do really.”

“Then I have not the least doubt that you will.”

“I don’t know on what you found your ‘not the least doubt,’ Maud. I think the way in which she talked about not accepting a man who had been once refused, looks very much as if her mind was made up the other way.”

“She is a sensible woman; she is not a mere girl, and she was never romantic or silly. Do you think she would be likely to throw away the happiness of two lives for a mere punctilio? If you do, I don’t.”

“‘He either fears his fate too much,
Or his desert is small,’”

murmured the Vicar. “Well, well, Maud, time will show. I shall certainly put it to the touch before very long, but still there is no good in hurrying matters. I will give her time to think and judge and make up

her mind, and to decide whether she likes me well enough to discard her pride—for after all it is only pride. If she does, thank God; if not, I can bear it, Maud, and still acknowledge that I have much to live for; but farewell to a dream of domestic happiness, such as some men—most men, perhaps,—see fulfilled.”

“I am glad we have talked about it,” said Maud. “I am glad I know what you really wish and feel. I thought you had never forgotten her, but you know I could not be sure. I have not a fear myself. If a woman is not to be won by such a faithful attachment as yours, nothing will win her.”

“I think that is nonsense,” said the Vicar rather sharply. “I wish you would not lay so much stress on that sort of thing. A man would rather a woman married him because she loved him than because he loved her.”

“Yes, perhaps; but it’s very nice for the woman the other way, you know.”

The Vicar went out and took a long solitary walk, thinking and musing over the past, the present, and the future. What

was the future likely to be? The past was so very different from anything he had ever intended that it should be, that he felt it would be utterly absurd to speculate in any way on the future; the present was all that he could reckon on. But then what was the present? it was, in fact, only that actual hour during which he was walking by himself on the cliff—that evening; the next day something he had never calculated on might be said or done that would change all the rudiments of events on which he could form a future now. He thought of that exquisite dream in which he had loved Freda—in which he had thought of marrying Freda. Had she been the girl of low birth he had believed her—had she not been Lionel Fane's wife—had his sudden passion won her—what sort of a wife would she have made him? what sort of a home would theirs have been? They would by this time have been married more than a year; have become, according to common phraseology, old married people. Would Freda have loved him? would his love for her have stood the wear and tear of married life? and then supposing just now

he had met Anna again—what would he have thought of her? how would he have felt towards her? How was it that he had ceased to care about Freda? and how was it that he cared for Anna? And was this really the case, or was he deceiving himself? Why did his whole being thrill with the sweetest pain whenever that lovely dream of his love for Freda came back to him? If he stood at the altar with Anna and vowed to love, honour, and cherish her, would he feel the exquisite bliss that had been his during those three days. Nay, would he feel even the thrill that went through his heart at only the recollection of it?

After a time he roused himself from these thoughts, which he condemned as enervating and useless. He recalled his feelings when he discovered that Freda was his friend's wife—the grief—the struggle—the conquest. He recalled how complete the conquest had been, and his own deep thankfulness thereat; and how never since Lionel Fane's death, he had thought of his widow, as he had thought of the servant girl in his garden gathering

peas. And now it was not Mrs. Fane in her pretty drawing-room and expensive dresses that made his heart thrill ; it was that Freda—the Freda of the past—the Freda that never could appear to him again. It was on Anna his interest concentrated at present, not on Freda ; and if he ever stood at the altar with Anna to pledge those solemn, beautiful vows, perhaps he should not—nay, he knew he should not—experience that delicious joy that glorified the past. But what then ? let that remain a thing apart in his life, as a moment too fragile and radiant to last. What he *should* experience, he firmly believed, was a higher and a better feeling, and one on which his future happiness could more securely be built.

Just as he came to this conclusion, and had cleared his mind from sundry doubts and oppressions, that were not at all at home in the pure atmosphere of that transparent mind, he met Mr. Percival indulging, like himself, in the doubtful pleasure of a solitary walk.

“ Well, I suppose you settled all those abstruse questions after I was gone,” said he,

joining the other. "That young lady, Mr. Underwood, does not care what subjects she handles ; there are *no* things in heaven or earth that are not dreamt of in her philosophy. Upon my word, there are not."

"She is clever, and she is thoughtful. She has a great deal more in her than one would imagine ; and yet I don't know whether one does not see that she has even at first in her quaint suggestive remarks."

"Which remarks never suggested to you then, I conclude, that she was not what some people call 'all there'?"

Mr. Underwood was obliged to take up again the thread of the banished past, and to remember Freda in the wood, and how that very idea had occurred to him, and how he had been really alarmed by it, and how he had rejoiced to find himself safe outside the darkness under the starry sky, in which Freda declared that moons and planets crept.

He gave a half-sad little smile, but answered at once :

"I think she plays with her own mind as she does with the minds of others."

"Life is all play to her."

“Why should it not be play till time or circumstance makes it earnest?”

“Well, when a woman is a widow, one fancies the *circumstance*, at least, has occurred.”

“I don’t know. Mrs. Fane is a good deal changed by her husband’s death, I think.”

“I suppose he was a bad sort of fellow. One gathers that, from everything one knows about her, at any rate.”

“I beg your pardon, Mr. Percival. He was my dear and intimate friend, and one of the finest characters in the world.”

“I am astonished to hear it. Then there was actually one person sorry for his death.”

“There were a great many, I am sure; but not one who loved him better or mourned him more sincerely than I did. The marriage, I need not tell you, was an unhappy one; it was a mistake. There were faults on both sides, but there were no great faults on either. She was not really grown up—she was a child, and he did not know it; but had he not died, had his life been spared, and had he come home, I fully think they might have been happy together.”

“And that was what you were looking forward to?” with a curious look.

“How hopefully and earnestly seems strange to myself now that it is all over, and the hope was vain.”

“From what I have been told, however, he laboured under one slight disadvantage—his wife did not love him; nay, I rather believe I have heard it affirmed that she hated him. That might have come a little in the way of a utopian reunion, might it not?”

“I think if he had understood her, he would have found no difficulty in making her love him; and it was to that I looked forward.”

“Ah, a man who understands her can easily win her, then?” with another curious look.

“I did not say that, Mr. Percival. A man, means any man. I only said poor Fane might have done so.”

“Poor Fane! how odd those words sound to me! Poor Fane! poor devil. A man—any man, Mr. Underwood, is to be pitied, I think, and may be called poor, who married

that girl—was not loved by her—and then died.”

“ It is the saddest history of a marriage— I may say of a life—I ever met with.”

“ And then, look at that girl, still wearing her airy black robes as mourning for *poor Fane*, full of joy and glee, to whom every moment of life is a happiness, except the moments in which something recalls *poor Fane's* detested memory ; and verily, those moments do not occur frequently ! A nice welcome *poor Fane* would receive if a miracle brought him to life again.”

“ You speak bitterly, but I think you do her injustice. Her character is too transparent for her even to wish to feign a virtue where she has it not. She was very unhappy in her marriage ; she did not love her husband ; and she is naturally very happy now, and she has no idea of pretending anything else, as some women would think it decorous to do.”

“ It would be a bold man who stepped into *poor Fane's* shoes.”

“ There I do not agree with you. It is my firm belief that the man who married Freda, having first won her affections, would

have no cause to regret the step he had taken. She has exceedingly warm and retentive affections. See her generous, delicate love for Miss Bell, and the faithfulness of her friendship for my sister and myself, whom she really knew very little, but under peculiar circumstances, which made her think we had been kind to her."

"And then there is Benjamin," said Mr. Percival thoughtfully.

"Benjamin? is there Benjamin? Why who is he?"

"A poor sick little boy she visits frequently, and who thinks her an angel. Miss Corabel says she has often given up some amusement for his sake, and has gone to him in the night, rather than disappoint him; and that she is just as eager about it as if it was a pleasure."

"She has a good heart, God bless her!" cried the Vicar joyfully. "I never heard a word of this."

The other man looked at him grimly.

"You are very glad she has a good heart," said he, in rather a sullen manner. "And you really never heard of Benjamin? Well,

I wronged her there then ; I fancied that might have been got up to please the parson."

"That shows you are not capable of understanding her one bit," cried the Vicar, in great indignation.

"Nay, I did not really think that," said Mr. Percival, a little ashamed ; "but the idea did cross my mind, and I believe I tried to make myself think it."

"Unless I am very much mistaken," replied the Vicar, "Freda Fane's character will develop into one of the finest and noblest in the world."

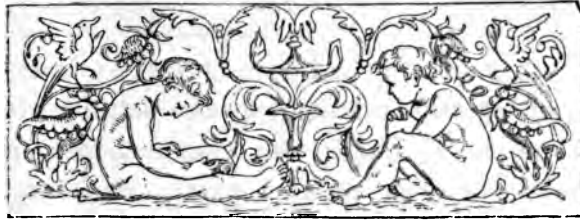
"I wonder whether there are any more women in the world the least like her."

"Did you ever see a face like hers ?" demanded the Vicar quickly.

"Well, I can't say that I ever did."

"Then why do you expect to find a character like hers either ?"

"Why indeed ?" replied the other. "And what sort of a world would it be if there *were* many Fredas in it ?"



CHAPTER III.

LOST !

THE next morning, when the others assembled at breakfast, Freda was missing. This, as we know, had happened once before, so that nobody felt any considerable degree of surprise. That she was out walking was evident, when Corabel had sought her in her bedroom in vain; and that she would remember she had not had any breakfast, as soon as she became too hungry, was a fact that also could not be disputed. Her friends agreed that there was no occasion for them to become too hungry also, as they had not forgotten the hour. Mr. Percival, when he had left them the

preceding evening, had been invited to breakfast there that morning, so the solution to the puzzle, if under any circumstances it could have been called a puzzle, was easy. He and Freda were walking together, and together would make their appearance. The other occasion when she had been late, it was remembered that he had joined her on the shore.

“They are two very agreeable people,” said the Vicar; “and when two very agreeable people are enjoying each other’s society, they forget how time flies.”

“Here they are!” cried Corabel, as Mr. Percival’s knock—by this time a well-known one at that special house in the terrace—was sounded on the door. A minute afterwards he himself entered the room.

“You will excuse us for having begun our breakfast,” said Corabel, “but we did not know how late you might be; the fish and the eggs have only just come in, they are quite warm; pray sit down and begin.”

Mr. Percival prepared to obey, but first looked round the table.

“ Mrs. Fane is quite well, I hope ? or has she been out and not returned yet ? ”

“ Was she not with you ? ”

“ Why, we took it for granted she was walking with you, ” said two or three voices.

“ Has she not gone to take her things off ? ” added Corabel.

“ I have not seen her this morning. I came straight by the cliff-walk from my cottage. ”

“ And you did not meet her ? ”

“ No ; I did not meet her. ”

“ Well, ” said Corabel composedly, “ she will come in as soon as she is hungry. She keeps very irregular hours. ”

So they continued to eat their breakfasts, chatting familiarly as they did so.

“ The season here will soon be over, ” Mr. Percival remarked ; “ I suppose this is a place entirely deserted then. I cannot imagine people staying at S—— in the winter, charming as it is now. ”

“ I believe the clergyman, and the doctor, and two or three half-pay officers make up the whole of the fashionable world, ” said Corabel.

“And you, Miss Bell, where do you go when S—— ceases to be gay?”

“Mrs. Fane talked of wintering abroad, she had an earnest desire to avoid winter altogether, and I think it might not be a bad plan. Notwithstanding her brilliant looks, I have never thought her really strong since the fever she had in Jamaica; indeed, I doubt whether that transparency and purity of complexion, ever does indicate strength.”

Two pair of eyes fixed themselves anxiously on the speaker; they were the eyes belonging to the gentlemen of the party.

“She always looks to me as an earthly personification of youth, hope, and joy,” said the Vicar with more enthusiasm than perhaps he would have displayed, but for the pang of anxiety occasioned by Corabel’s words, which did not leave him time for a moment’s reflection; “and the ideal of those things cannot exist without health.”

“If an ideal can exist at all,” remarked Mr. Percival calmly.

“We hope very much to persuade you both to come to us in the late autumn,” said

Maud, addressing Corabel. "My brother and I have been talking it over with Freda, and she half promised."


"Yes," answered she, with a smile that brought Maud's faint blush into her cheek, "so she told me, and I am sure we shall both like it very much."

"And she will leave off her mourning, and not resume it, she tells me."

"I think she is right; under all the circumstances, I really think she has worn mourning long enough, and I am not fond of seeing it myself in gay assemblies and large parties. The use of mourning is to set mourners a little apart from the world, and put others a little on their guard before them."

"I suppose black was never worn over a lighter heart than in Mrs. Fane's case," remarked Mr. Percival, with a something in his voice too like a sneer to be pleasing to those he addressed.

"Mrs. Fane is so perfectly independent," Corabel continued, very much as if he had not spoken at all; "she has hardly any relatives-in-law, no near ones certainly. There



is no one whose feelings she can hurt by leaving off black."

"Certainly not her own," said Mr. Percival.

"But Mr. Fane had a sister who is abroad with her husband, but may, of course, come home some time or other," said Maud; "I remember seeing her long ago, and thinking her a very sensible, superior woman."

"Poor Freda!" smiled Corabel, "fancy her with a sensible, superior sister-in-law. I wonder how they would get on together."

"If Mrs. Fane marries again," said Mr. Percival, "she will probably drop all her late husband's connections; she will be only too glad to cut the whole concern."

Nobody liked this, true as it was, perhaps nobody liked it just because it was so true.

"We are amusing ourselves discussing our hostess's affairs," said the Vicar rather pointedly, "even to planning a second marriage for her, and how, in that case, she would behave to the connections by her first marriage; but where, I wonder, is that hostess herself? Surely, Miss Bell, she is

not in the habit of being as late as this? Why it is nearer eleven than ten o'clock."

"No," Corabel admitted, "she was not in the *habit* of being so late—she had never, in fact, been so late before; but then it was impossible to say that Freda was in the *habit* of anything. The only habit she had, was to have no habits."

Maud proposed that, having satisfied the cravings of appetite, they should wait now till Freda's return, and finish their breakfast then, but Corabel would not hear of that.

"It would only vex her," she said, "and do no good. We will have a hot breakfast kept for her, and she will eat it whenever she comes in."

She rang the bell, and gave the necessary orders.

"Does she ever pay visits at this hour?" Mr. Underwood asked. "Can she be breakfasting with any one else?"

"I never knew her do so, and she enjoys our present little party so much, that it is not likely. She knows very few people here she *could* breakfast with—very few families, I mean."

Corabel did not say that the fact that Mr. Percival had been invited to eat his breakfast at the terrace, made it highly improbable that Freda should take hers anywhere else.

“I don’t suppose she would mind about *that*,” said the ingrate; “she is probably breakfasting *tête-à-tête* with Mr. Jennings or Captain Bradbury; in the latter case I hope Miss Lenox won’t mind.”

“She certainly is doing nothing of the sort,” said the Vicar testily; “she has an innate instinctive delicacy worth all the barriers formed by etiquette.”

Corabel glanced from one gentleman to the other, bit her lip, cast down her eyes, and finished her fish in silence. The Vicar perceived her meaning, coloured, and felt uncomfortable.

“I might just as well have held my tongue,” he thought to himself. “I wish I had held my tongue; but that fellow Percival irritates me with his sneers and his innuendoes. I wonder whether he cares for her. I wonder whether she would have him. I wonder whether he is worthy of her.”

“It is curious,” said Corabel suddenly,

“how the same feeling will make people act in diametrically opposite ways. The feeling is the same, but the characters are different. One will run a person down, and find offence in everything, and another not permit the faintest breath of censure, and yet both may be feeling exactly the same, though the outward expression is so different.”

The two gentlemen looked a little out of countenance.

“I run nobody down, and take offence at nothing,” cried Percival, with a decided show of temper.

“And I wouldn’t hear a chimney-sweeper unjustly blamed without defending her,” exclaimed Underwood, apparently hurt.

“There are *no* female chimney-sweepers,” corrected Mr. Percival, quite cool again, and speaking with his accustomed dryness.

“Oh! I do wish Freda would come back!” cried Maud, and everybody present seconded the wish in their hearts, though not aloud.

After this Mr. Percival, having finished his breakfast, rose and took his leave.

“You will make my apologies to Mrs. Fane,” he said lightly; “I have letters to

write this morning, and can't idle away more time. Pray tell her, with my kindest regards, that whenever I invite her to breakfast, I will make a point of being at home myself."

With which parting sting he went away.

"I can't make out that man—I am in twenty minds about that man," cried the Vicar. "Who is he? Where does he come from? Has he any one belonging to him? He is a gentleman, clever, agreeable, and from the tone of his conversation apparently a man of principle; but is it not a very odd thing that we are all of us so intimate with him, that he is quite *l'ami de la maison*, and yet that we none—not one of us, know anything about him or his belongings?"

"He must *have* belongings," said Maud, "because he said he was going to write letters."

"A man may write to his lawyer, or to his bootmaker," retorted Lewes; "but I admit that at the moment I felt some satisfaction in hearing him say he had letters to write. Yet, the fact of our thinking of this—both you and I—only proves how lamentably igno-

rant we are about this intimate friend of ours. Miss Bell, what do you say? Do you think it is a desirable state of affairs?"

Corabel hesitated, and seemed undecided what to reply.

"I suppose it is because we are two such very young ladies keeping house together, as you said, Mr. Underwood; though, for that matter, I am four-and-twenty, and might have known better; but, to tell you the truth, till you called my attention to the fact the other day, I had never thought about it, and it never occurred to me that it was odd. We took all our acquaintances for granted when we came here. It seemed as if they must be all right, or we shouldn't meet them in society. We made no inquiries about Mr. Jennings or Captain Bradbury, or any of them; but then, I must admit (now you have led me to think about it) that it very soon *came out*—I am sure I don't know how—that Mr. Jennings was Lady Charlotte Jennings' son, and that Captain Bradbury distinguished himself in India."

"And about Mr. Percival *nothing* has come out?"

“No,” said Corabel slowly, and evidently turning her mind back into the past, “I must confess that nothing has come out.”

“And yet he is the only one who is really intimate in the house, therefore the only one about whom it really matters.”

“Yes, that is quite true.”

“Well, I do think, considering *how* intimate he is, that it is not at all satisfactory.”

“I don’t see what we are to do. If he would tell us about himself it would be all very well; but if he does not, what can we do? He knows no one here. He has no profession. How *can* we find out about him? And is it not rather hard to deny a man your friendship because he is not egotistical, or never has happened to mention who his father was?”

“Only when the question concerns ladies, and young ladies with no chaperons—a little caution *is* desirable, and *friendship* is not, or may not be, the only feeling in question.”

“And all this time, while you two are arguing, I am getting seriously uneasy about dear Freda,” said Maud. “What can have become

of her? Do you know it is past twelve o'clock?"

Past twelve o'clock! The announcement fell heavily in the room, silenced the two talkers, and brought a look of startled anxiety into at least one of their faces. That face was the Vicar's, for Corabel, who knew Freda best, was certainly the least perplexed of the three.

"Of course it would be really alarming if it was any one else," she said, "but Freda—You *know* she would do anything for the whim of the moment. She might go any where. She might even hide, just to see what we would all of us do."

The Vicar turned hastily about, opened a cupboard behind the door, and shook out the window-curtains.

"It never occurred to me that it was not safe for her to go out alone, for fear of her playing some mad freak; but when one comes to think of it, it really is *not* safe. The only wonder is that she has never done anything like this before—not that she is doing it now. Why, Mr. Underwood, did you hear how it was we came to S——? Did she ever tell you

the principle on which she selected this place?"

Then Corabel gave him the history of Freda's experiment on Bradshaw, which resulted in their visiting S——.

"And nothing I could say had the least effect on her. She only assured me that if it was not a nice place we could come away the minute after we arrived—but that we must go there to begin with!"

They none of them could help laughing a little at this, and at the pathetic tone in Corabel's voice as she told of it.

"Poor Anna!" said Maud Underwood.

"No, I am not poor Anna," replied the other; "I am not to be pitied. I am very happy with her. I love her dearly. I admire her greatly. I think her one of the finest creatures in the world." And as she spoke out thus boldly in the praise of the woman she thought he loved, and knew he had asked to marry him, she addressed her old lover with almost a defiant air. "I should be wretchedly ungrateful, too, if I was not content, and did not love her heartily. Still

we can't judge her by ordinary rules, or expect ordinary conduct from her."

"Benjamin!" cried the Vicar suddenly, in rather a loud voice.

Maud looked at him in mild amazement. Was it a clerical exclamation, taking the place of the inelegant "My goodness!" or "Good gracious!"—almost a mild Biblical oath? But to her increased surprise, Corabel replied:

"Benjamin! Very true—how silly of me not to think of that before! Of course Benjamin—he is worse—or he insists on her staying. That will be quite enough to keep Freda, even when she had asked Mr. Percival to breakfast."

She spoke the last words without thinking, and was surprised at the glow of pleasure they called into the Vicar's face. Was it not more natural he should be vexed instead of pleased? Verily there never *was* any understanding men. Benjamin had to be explained to Maud, but her brother undertook to do that.

"If you will put your hat on," he said to Corabel, "I will explain Benjamin to Maud,

and then we can go there together and insist on her coming home and getting some breakfast. You or I can take her place if it is really necessary for any one to be there, which in all probability it is not; but I am sure you are right about Freda not being strong, and nothing is more trying than going without breakfast."

So Corabel put on her hat, while Mr. Underwood explained Benjamin to his sister, and then Maud said she would take a book and sit on the shore opposite the house till they all came back together. She was not strong enough to like beginning the day with a walk, and she was relieved of all anxiety about her friend by the suggestion of Benjamin.

"It would be a great satisfaction to everybody," said Mr. Underwood in a confidential manner as he and Corabel walked together through the town. "I am sure it would be a great satisfaction to everybody if Mrs. Fane was happily married to a safe sensible man."

"A clergyman, for instance," was the calm reply. "Do you think she would

make a good clergyman's wife, Mr. Underwood?"

"I think she would make anything in right hands," he answered, piqued.

"So do I," cried Corabel heartily. "And I think any man who wins her is to be envied."

"And yet the man who did win her was most miserable."

"That must have been his own fault."

"I am not at all sure of that. You have no idea what a noble fellow Fane was. I never knew a man more calculated to make a woman happy. I would have given him my own sister without a fear." Maud's brother could say these words now, that six months ago he would have been most unwilling to utter. "And he loved her passionately."

"But she did not love him."

"Yes—there was the mistake—that fatal marrying without love—without even understanding what love is."

"But Freda has grown since then. With all her childlikeness she is not such a child now. I think she understands things. I think she would make a very good wife now,

to any man who loved her, and who knew how to guide her."

"I am almost sure it would be better for her to leave S——, and for this intimacy with an unknown man to be broken off. It really frightens me! It is horrible to think that her life might be wrecked again."

"You are very much afraid lest she should care for him."

"Perhaps you don't think he cares for her? A man often pays more attention to the woman he doesn't care for, than to the woman he does. Perhaps after all——"

He spoke rapidly, and stopped abruptly.

His companion answered him with perfect composure.

"It is very difficult to judge what any man feels or thinks; and I don't know why we attempt to do it in this case. Very likely there is nothing; but one thing I do feel, and that is, that Mr. Percival is a man to be trusted."

"How *can* you tell that? What do you know of him?—not even who his father was, or what he is himself. He may be an impostor—he may be anything——"

“No—he is not an impostor. He is a gentleman. He is a good man ; he has high principles. You admitted this yourself. I am not romantic or impulsive. I don’t think I ever was—was I? Certainly I am not now. I see it is imprudent to form an intimacy with any one we know nothing about, and I don’t quite understand how it is we have done it ; but I am convinced no harm will come of it. I repeat what I said before. He may be trusted.”

“Oh, it is evident what a high opinion you have of him—what an influence this unknown man, whose very name may not really be the one he goes by, has gained over you. Mrs. Fane is not the only person to be thought about and guarded ; there are others equally precious. I am an old friend, Anna—a very old friend, perhaps I may be permitted——”

The Vicar spoke hastily, and with some agitation, but while in the middle of his speech he was interrupted, for they had arrived at the door of the cottage where Benjamin lived, and before they could open it, it opened from the inside, and Mr. Percival came out.

“You here!” they both cried, astonished.

“She is not there,” replied Mr. Percival; and the three looked blankly in each other’s faces.

“Then where *can* she be?” cried Corabel.

“I thought of Benjamin before I left your house,” continued he, “and I came here directly; but she is not here; she has not been here. Miss Bell, what are you thinking of, to let her go about alone in this manner? She came to my place once in the middle of the night!”

“I? But, oh, what can I do? I knew nothing—I did not even know she was out. How can I prevent it?”

Mr. Percival had spoken in anger, and Miss Bell replied with much distress; but the Vicar stopped them both.

“What does it matter,” he said, “who can prevent it, or who allows it? It is *done*, and the thing is—what *we* can do. Very likely it is of no real matter, and she will come laughing home; if so, it is important we make no fuss, and do not cause any talk in the place. Still there is another side to

the question, and she may have met with an accident. It is necessary, therefore, that we do something."

"The difficulty is to know what to do," said Mr. Percival gloomily. "She is as independent as she is reckless. No one controls her; she may do anything."

"Except anything wrong," replied Corabel softly.

"Anything wrong?" exclaimed Mr. Percival, with sudden excitement. "Why what have you thought of?—what do you expect? Is there anybody? Can she have eloped?"

Corabel gave him an indignant glance, but the Vicar took alarm.

"Is there any one?" he cried. "You must know—had she any intimacy? Do you think she preferred some one else?"

"Some one *else*?" repeated Corabel, with a pointed emphasis on the last word. But Mr. Underwood neither changed colour nor showed the least sign of confusion. He had been thinking of Mr. Percival, not of himself as she imagined. "No, I am perfectly sure that there is no one. I know just how

intimate she is with them all, and how little she cares for any of them."

"And the girls walked and went out together, so there really *was* no opportunity." Mr. Percival spoke, addressing the Vicar, as if he felt that he would agree with him, that this was more satisfactory evidence than any Corabel had brought forward. And the Vicar looked relieved.

"And she may have returned home while we are standing talking here," he said.

"Had she made any promise to visit Benjamin to-day?" asked Corabel of Mr. Percival.

"I'm sure I don't know; I never thought of asking."

Corabel ran into the cottage and returned in a minute with no more hope in her face than when she entered it.

"No," she said, shaking her head, "he does not expect her to visit him to-day."

"As if that really showed anything," said Mr. Percival impatiently; "as if she would not break fifty engagements, if the whim seized her."

"Not with Benjamin," replied Corabel,

“you only say that because you don’t know her.”

“Oh, of course I don’t know her,” he cried, and his manner was very bitter. “Of course I know her less than anybody else does.”

The others looked at him, surprised.

“Well,” he said quite roughly, “are we to stand here all day doing nothing? and she *dead*, perhaps—*drowned*—or fallen from a cliff! For God’s sake let us do something!”

Mr. Underwood appeared quite startled, but it was not at Mr. Percival’s words, though in the appalling images they called up, they were enough to startle any one. It was at something in the way in which he spoke—a way that was almost savage, and that contrasted strangely with Mr. Percival’s ordinary manner; and this way seemed wonderfully familiar to the Vicar, though he was certain he had never heard Mr. Percival speak in it before. Did it remind him of some one else? and if so, who did it remind him of? This question he could not answer; though, for some not understood reason he had experienced a shock, and a thrill had gone through

him as Mr. Percival spoke. For a moment his thoughts were withdrawn from Freda, and he stared in silent perplexity into the other man's face, which, as he stared, became gradually of the deepest red. However, Mr. Percival did not submit himself for any length of time to this scrutiny, but with an impatient "Pish!" muttered behind his beard, he turned on his heel, and walked rapidly back towards the sea.

"Yes, and we had better go also," said Corabel. "Oh! it is very odd; but though a little uneasy, I really am not frightened. I think we shall find her when we get home. And this is not a dangerous place, and she is so full of whims; she is such a will-o'-the-wisp."

"And he—what is he, Anna? Is he a will-o'-the-wisp? does he remind you of any one?"

"Remind me of any one? Oh dear no," she replied with decision, "not in the least. I think he is like nobody except himself. He is quite an unusual sort of a man. Who *should* he remind me of?"

"I don't know; but when he spoke in that

reckless, vehement way, I felt a sudden shock, as if I was somewhere else, talking with other people ; and how his manner changed ! How different from what it usually is !”

“ He was excited and agitated. Of course his manner was different from a mere society manner—an every-day commonplace manner.”

“ And how entirely he loses that slight foreign accent as he becomes intimate.”

“ That slight foreign accent ?” repeated she thoughtfully ; “ yes, I remember our noticing it when we first knew him.”

“ And did he resume it again for our benefit ?”

“ I think he did ; I think it must be his manner with strangers.”

“ Well, he is a puzzle to me, and I wish we were quit of him. I am not at all easy about him—I am not indeed.”

“ Because his manner is different at first to what it becomes when he grows intimate ? But really, Mr. Underwood, that is such a very common thing ; your own manner is as different as possible.”

Lewes almost felt as if he had received a little slap in the face.

“Is it?” he replied, with rather an uneasy smile. “At least *you* should know what my manner is where I am most intimate—for the sake of ‘auld lang syne.’”

“Yes,” said Corabel calmly, “and Freda should know also.”

“Freda? Oh, Freda! it is incessantly Freda! She has told you, of course? ladies always do, and I suppose you have also told her? Well, Miss Bell, then I have been rejected twice, I admit it freely; but is it generous to be always twitting me with this?”

This was quite a new view of the case to Corabel. The colour rushed into her cheeks and the tears into her eyes.

“Oh!” she cried faintly, “I did not mean *that*; I was not thinking of *that*.”

The tables were turned. It was she now who was agitated or uncomfortable—the Vicar who was calm and cool.

“I admit it all freely,” he continued with great composure, “only in one case it was a long love that influences a lifetime, in the other it was the infatuation of a day. And let me say now, Miss Bell—Anna—let me say——”

“Oh, have you not brought her? was she not there?” cried Maud, advancing from the shore to meet them.

“Has she not returned to you then?” replied he, provoked at the interruption, yet with anxiety freshly aroused.

“Returned? no; I made sure that you would find her with Benjamin.”

“She had not been there at all, and had made no promise to visit him to-day.”

It was the Vicar only who spoke. Corabel, still agitated and confused by the turn the conversation had taken, stood silent, her gauze veil hiding the tears on her cheeks, and her thoughts a thousand miles away from the unknown fate of her lost friend.

“Dear me!” cried Maud, “how extremely unpleasant it is! I wish Arthur was here.”

“I hope there will be no need for his services,” replied Lewes, rather crossly.

Maud had not been thinking of an accident, or of her lover as a medical man; but it was her nature to look up, and to rest on one stronger than herself, so she turned as a matter of course to her lover and wished for him when there was any doubt or trouble.

Till she was engaged, it was her brother she depended on, and perhaps the substitution of another in his place was not particularly agreeable to that brother. Those substitutions, those settings aside, are what many of us are subjected to in this world, and the discipline is not pleasant. He or she who marries happily and who remains the undisputed sovereign in the heart of another, only can escape this painful experience. There is no kind of *friendship* that is not liable to be set aside for a higher feeling. Married love alone, being the highest and most exclusive of all affection, when supreme, remains so for ever.



CHAPTER IV.

FOUND !

THE three looked at each other, wondering what *could* be done next. All saw the disadvantage of making the matter public, and felt that this should not be done unless it became actually necessary. The disappearance of a woman—especially if that woman was a lady, young, beautiful, and a widow—was sure to give rise to innumerable surmises, some of which might be prejudicial to her reputation. Two of these three friends of Freda's felt a loyal conviction that she had not eloped with anybody, or done anything foolish of that sort. It might have been supposed, there-

fore, that they would have felt equally certain that some accident must have befallen her, and would, without a minute's hesitation, have communicated with the police.

But unfortunately, or fortunately, as the case might be, there was another alternative still. The most probable solution of the mystery was that this dear Freda of theirs was playing them a trick—that it was a freak, a jest, a whim, an experiment to see how they would each and all of them behave under the circumstances; and this being the case, they desired to delay the asking for the help of the police and publishing Freda's loss to the world, to the longest possible limit that they could dare to allow themselves. This limit they all silently felt had almost been reached, and then the positions they were in would *have* to pass into a new phase.

Meantime Mr. Percival took more decided action. Perhaps he had less confidence in the missing girl than they had; but if so, perhaps he had a still greater objection to making her disappearance known. What he did was this. After he had left the others he waited for a minute outside the railway-

station, while with elaborate care he composed his features, and forced their expression to be calm. He then thrust his hands deep down into his pockets, and sauntering lazily in, stood about for a minute, looking up at the picture advertisements that adorned the wall of the shed. After that he walked into the ticket-office and addressed the clerk.

“Fine day,” he dropped the words carelessly out of his lips, as if he hardly knew he was speaking them. “Are there any excursion trains to-day?”

“Yes, sir, four; the season is getting so near an end they’re laid on rather heavy now.”

“They’re a confounded nuisance; but I suppose they don’t let them interfere with the regular traffic. What train did Mrs. Fane leave by this morning?”

“Mrs. Fane? let me see—Oh, to be sure, return ticket by 8.30. Will be back by the train due in five minutes—3.45. I warned her not to be later because of the excursionists.”

Mr. Percival’s broad chest perceptibly heaved under his grey coat with the great

breath he drew of immeasurable relief. After which his face darkened, and he ground his teeth together. "What business," so his thoughts went—"what business has she to be gadding about by 8.30 and 3.45 trains with *return* tickets—young, beautiful, and unprotected."

He seemed to think the hour of the train, and the fact that the ticket was a "return," had a good deal to do with the impropriety of the proceeding.

"Well, I will wait about here, at any rate, and receive her when she does come. I wonder whether she would mind if I told her Maud and Corabel were both ill—dead—from the suspense and alarm. *She* mind! She care for anything but what concerns herself! She mourn the death of friends, or feel remorse if they died by her means! As soon make an impression that does not exist only for itself on the diamond, changing every moment into new beauties at every ray of light it reflects, but melting—never!"

And Mr. Percival thrust his hands still deeper down into his pockets than he had placed them in his assumption of carelessness,

and shut his lips tightly together in a way which he had when not pleased—a way which gave a very decided expression indeed to his face, or would have done so if the dense moustachios and beard had not entirely concealed more than half of it.

Three forty-five arrived at the exact moment when that hour was due, but the 3.45 train did not arrive with it.

Ten, twenty minutes elapsed, and still the train had not made its appearance.

“I hope it hasn’t come to grief,” said a man who was waiting for it; “if it was late at all on the upper part of the line it might come in contact with the excursionist from M—— and there would be a pretty look-out.”

Mr. Percival went at once to the station-master. The station-master admitted that he was not perfectly easy in his mind. The train was later than could be accounted for by any ordinary circumstances. At this time of year the lines were all flooded by excursionists. No doubt if the 3.45 was late in reaching Molesworth—the station thirty miles off—there might be a fear of an

excursionist train from M—— being in the way; but still it was to be supposed all proper precautions would be taken, and there was no reason yet to think that an accident had happened.

Yet—yes, on that little word “yet” the safety of Freda’s life and limbs depended. Freda killed! Freda a cripple for life! Freda taken up a crushed indistinguishable heap! Faugh! how did such thoughts and fears *dare* come to disturb his reasonable brain? Then he suddenly thought of the people at home—the anxious people who had only vague terrors for their companion, and were ignorant of Freda having left S—— by the early train. How had he happened not to think of them before? not to send back a message at once to tell them what he had heard. Was not he as cold and hard as the diamond himself?

He hastily tore a leaf from his pocket-book and wrote on it, “Mrs. Fane left this by an early train and is expected back soon.” Then he paused before signing his name, gave a little bitter laugh, and added, “L. Percival.”

He folded and directed this billet to Rev.

L. Underwood, and finding a boy hanging about in expectation of the train, desired him to take it as quickly as he could run to the terrace.

“That will relieve their anxiety for the present, at all events,” he said, “and prevent their doing anything rash or unnecessary in the search for her. Oh! Freda, Freda!”

And now the worst came; at least the worst that the present moment could contain, though infinitely worse than that worst might lie in the inevitable future. The message that the experienced station-master had in his own mind for some time expected, arrived, and that message was, that a collision had occurred between the train due at 3.45 and the excursionist train from M—— one mile beyond Molesworth, and the train due to leave S—— at 4.28 would be detained at Molesworth some time while the line was being cleared, but that it had better start at once with any doctors that could come in it. The injured passengers were being removed to the inn at Molesworth as rapidly as possible, and S—— as well as other places was telegraphed to for doctors.

Mr. Percival heard the news with perfect calmness, though his face, always pale, became a deadly white colour.

“She may not be in the train, and she may not be hurt,” that was all he said to himself, but he took a ticket for Molesworth and his seat in the train, which waited for a few minutes, till the only two medical men S—— could supply had made their appearance, and taken their seats also. The train was off, and all that had happened had occupied an inconceivably short space of time.

Percival sat silent in his corner of the carriage with folded arms and downcast eyes. Terrible anxiety was gnawing at his heart, but he made no sign. A romantic interest surrounds as with a halo her who, wandering over the battlefield after the victory has been won and lost, knows not whether in every dead face that stares blankly up at her, she may not recognise that of her beloved for whom she searches, supported by the hope, which in its uncertainty is anguish, that her search may be in vain. There is nothing romantic in the position of railway passengers whom the train is bearing rapidly

on to the scene of an accident, in which *their* loved ones may have met a death more dreadful than that of battle; yet their feelings are much the same as are the feelings of the romantic woman. Mr. Percival's were not to be coveted as he in silence listened to the conversation of the two doctors, who glibly discussed former railway accidents which had come under their ken, mentioning every loss of life or limb, or disfigurements, and obliterations of so horrible a nature that my pen refuses to indite their words, while at the description of every shocking death the idea of Freda, Freda, Freda, rose up so vividly before Percival's bodily eyes that the strong man groaned aloud.

Where was she? was she anywhere? Was she alive? was she dead? And if dead, was that fair body and exquisite face a torn and wounded mass from sight of which the most loving heart must shrink? Oh, if she might only be safe and he might atone to her by the devotion of a life!

What did he mean by "atone to her?"

Or if only alive—if crippled, wounded, invalidated for ever—she would be Freda, his

Freda still ; and if only she *would* be his, her utter dependence on him would be but an added charm, and endear her to him more entirely !

But she might be dead ! Dead without hearing, without knowing, without understanding ! Oh ! anything but that—anything but that ! Dead ! and the world to be the same, his life to continue, and no Freda—only no Freda !

And then the train arrived at the station, and everybody got out of it.

The first question asked was, where were the sufferers ? Were all removed ? Yes, all ; they were at the inn. How many killed ? how many injured ? Twenty-five dead, and a hundred and seven not expected to live many minutes. No, no, no ! said others, there were only nineteen deaths and thirty-seven injured, most of whom might recover. The fact was, that only two persons had been killed—the stoker and a third-class passenger—and that nineteen were more or less injured, chiefly less.

Mr. Percival, among many others, went straight to the inn. It was a scene of

unwonted fuss, excitement and confusion ;— a fairly-sized old-fashioned house, which had once, before railroads were thought of, been a county family hotel, and which still contained a ball-room where many a pleasant dance had been held in long-vanished brighter days.

The anxious inquirers were informed that “all the bodies” had been carried into this ball-room—turned for the occasion into a temporary hospital—that the doctors were at work and some of the passengers assisting them ; the rest of the passengers were in the coffee-room. The words, “all the bodies,” had a cheerful sound, before which some of the inquirers drew back. Mr. Percival stepped hastily into the coffee-room. If *not* one of the “bodies,” he felt certain she would be there. Freda, he knew, would fly from scenes of sorrow, and from terrible sights. She would be recruiting her own strength, poor child, not assisting others.

His eager eyes devoured the coffee-room with one rapid comprehensive glance. Alas ! Freda was not there. Alas !

Ah ! but she might not have been in the train at all ; that was the great hope, and to

that hope he clung. Then something within him told him that she had been in the train, and that she was dead. Of course she was dead! Why had she left S—— in that sudden unexpected way? Why had the station-master told her to return by that particular train? Why had the accident happened, if she was not to be killed? There would be no use in it all, no reason for it, except to kill Freda. Of course he should find her among the dying ones upstairs. And so he walked rapidly up the flight of stairs, from the first landing of which the ball-room opened off.

He entered a long room which, with its gaily-painted walls and bare floor, presented a strange and melancholy appearance. It was filled with mattresses and stretchers, on which the injured had been hastily laid, and three or four men, with perhaps as many women, were hastening from one to the other of these temporary beds with their mournful occupants. Some of those hurt in the dreadful *mêlée* had probably been taken to separate rooms, so as his frightened eyes glanced from one pale or flushed face to another, laid on the

pillow, from which, perhaps, they might never rise again, the fact of not seeing the exquisite features of Freda did not bring *all* the relief to his burthened heart that it otherwise would have done. But on a sudden that poor heart of his gave a great leap in his breast, and he softly exclaimed, "Freda!"

Yes, there she stood, well, beautiful, radiant. She wore the white dress with light black trimmings which she affected most, her hat had been flung aside, and in the hurry her splendid hair had all fallen down and was partly hanging about her, partly knotted hastily back. She was supporting an injured man in her arms while one of the doctors did something to his shoulder, and she was saying gently all the while: "It will soon be over; it doesn't hurt much; he says you'll be well soon. Ah! how happy they'll be at home, won't they?"

She raised her eyes when she heard her name so unexpectedly pronounced in that strange hospital. What exquisite womanly depths lay in them that he had never seen there before. Had they never been there, or

was the fault his? Had he indeed been blind till this moment, and was the Freda he thought he had known not the real Freda?

A wild, unreasonable, intense joy took possession of his whole being as their eyes met, and he saw the sweet, almost infantine delight that shone through hers when they recognised him. They actually smiled till her lips could not help smiling too. Then she shook her head gently, and glanced down at the sufferer in her arms. He thought an angel might have just so smiled, so shaken her head, and so glanced down.

And this was Freda. This was the woman he had called heartless.

With rapid steps he sought her side. But she would not let him help her or relieve her from her burthen.

“I can do this,” she said; “you go to another of the poor things.”

“You are unhurt—quite unhurt?” he cried. “Were you awfully frightened? What a shock! what a scene—for you!”

“I’m not a bit hurt,” she said; “and it wasn’t what you’d expect. I hardly knew it

was there till it was over ; and then there was so much to do. Do be useful, please, and help the doctors."

So Mr. Percival had to leave her side for that of one of the sufferers ; but neither he nor Freda were kept long at their charitable work. Mr. Percival had arrived rather late on the scene of action, and his appearance was followed by that of real nurses and additional doctors, so that Freda and he were free to leave the patients in more skilful and experienced hands—finding themselves rather in the way than otherwise, where there was already too great a crowd.

They left the ball-room, therefore, together, but Freda paused on the threshold and looked back. It was a strange, wild, incongruous scene, with no pleasing object in any part of it ; and the young girl gave a little shiver as her eyes turned rapidly from one thing to another.

"And it is here they danced and flirted," she cried, "and the music rang out from that gallery. Oh ! are any of them going to die here ?"

"And if they are," said he, "must not we
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all die somewhere, and at some time? Oh! Freda, has not the shock been too much for you? Are you really not hurt or frightened?"

She stood still, with an almost rapt expression in her face. How exquisitely fair she was, with that innocent look in her transparent eyes. Her hands hung idly by her side as if she had scarcely strength to support them, and an air of languor crept over her.

"I am frightened *now*," she said so softly, that it was almost in a whisper she spoke; "but I was not then. Isn't that odd?"

And she sat down on the stairs and cried a little.

One of the doctors—an elderly man—came out of the ball-room just at the moment, and found Freda sitting on the stairs crying, and Percival regarding her with his soul in his eyes.

"Oh, you dear child!" he cried, in quite a paternally affectionate manner, "have you given way at last?" and he patted her shining hair. "I am so sorry; but no wonder. Yes, my dear, cry—you will be all the better for

it. I never saw anything like her!" he cried with enthusiasm, addressing Percival; "she was everything—such presence of mind, such calmness and such tenderness. No wonder the strain was too much."

"But it was no strain," replied Freda, her eyes smiling at the kind old man, through her tears. "I couldn't help it; I did just what came, and it seemed inevitable. I wasn't calm; there's nothing to praise me for, I'm afraid. If anybody had told me about it I wouldn't on any account, I'd have gone to Jamaica to escape it, but when I couldn't help it I did what I could because I liked it; it was a matter of course."

"'O woman! in our hours of ease,' etc., etc." replied the doctor, smiling back at her. "You have described a true woman, my dear, whose impulses are perfect, and who does right and sacrifices herself, because she can't help it."

"Well, please yourself," cried the girl, recovering her gaiety; "if I am to be a heroine, *malgré moi*, I must submit to my hard fate with a good grace."

The doctor laughed and patted her shining

head again, while Mr. Percival stood by regarding them in rather melancholy silence; and the medical man passed on to the bed-chambers where other patients lay.

“I think I do like nursing,” said Freda, surprised. “I liked it when Maud dreamt the ‘Angel in the House.’ My uncle said I was ever so much better than my aunt, and I delight in Benjamin. One must do something—mustn’t one? After a time, you know, one can’t always go on doing nothing—can one? I think I will be a hospital nurse,” she added very seriously, turning in an appealing way to him for advice.

He looked at her with a strange look, but her mind was so unaffectedly occupied by this idea of nursing that she saw nothing of the passion of emotion in his face.

“Why don’t you tell me?” she cried, impatient at a silence she was very far from understanding.

“Tell you? tell you what?” he answered. “Are you not contented then with what you are?”

“With what I am? oh yes, to be sure, but not with what I shall be. I shan’t be

always *this!* I shall be middle-aged ; I shall be old. I don't like it, but I shall ; and it won't be my fault. They are middle-aged and old everywhere ; they were in the train ; they are at S—— more even than they are young—and so I shall be too. And then I must do something—don't you think so ? when life is not sweet, as life only ; and so I suppose I shall be a hospital nurse."

She threw her hair back and looked up at him with a bright hopeful face ; a smile played about her lips and was reflected in her eyes ; a soft rosy colour stole into her transparent cheeks. She seemed almost a child yet—a lovely idle child. While she spoke of age her hearer felt, as if age never could approach her, and a strange thrill went through his heart. Would she then one day die ? could Freda die ?

"Age," he said, "is nearer to me than to you."

"Oh!" she cried, "what does that signify ? you are a man. It is of no consequence a man being old ; and they work when they're young too, so it does not make much difference. I am thinking about myself."

She said this with a little contented air, as if it must silence him at once.

“I can suggest a better provision for middle life than being a hospital nurse?” he answered.

“Can you?” she said rather listlessly, and leaning her head against the banisters; “what’s that?”

“Marriage.”

“Marriage!” she made a disdainful little *moue*. “No, thank you; I’ve tried that, and it doesn’t pay.”

“Freda,” he cried desperately, “do you think you could love *me*?”



CHAPTER V.

ENGAGED.

FREDA gave a little scream and stared blankly into his face. From it, she seemed to catch his meaning more than from his words alone. She hung her head and the colour stole up; the beautiful maiden-blush spread all over her fair face, to the roots of her hair. She laughed a little to herself—an innocent, childlike laugh.

Then she looked at him again—a frank bright look—but her eyes sank as they met the passion in his, and she trembled.

“Yes,” she said, whispering, “I think I could.”

The next moment she was caught in his arms and strained to his breast with a vehemence of joy that subdued her, and she lay there quite calm and happy.

“Oh,” she said, “I do think that I love you.”

He kissed her again and again.

“Will you marry me?” he asked, and he gave a little laugh, too, as he said that.

She drew herself back from his embrace at this question, and reflected seriously.

“Well—yes,” she replied at last; “I do really think I might marry you. It would be *better* not—only if you wish it very much, I don’t mind.”

But she sighed as she spoke.

“You have a terror of marriage,” he said; and there was both gloom and sorrow in his voice.

“I was so unhappy,” she answered simply; “but I shall not be unhappy with you.”

“So help me God, you shall not,” was his answer, uttered with a solemnity that startled Freda.

She looked at him timidly.

“We needn't be in any hurry about it—need we?” she said coaxingly, sidling up to him as she spoke.

“I will not plague you or hurry you,” he replied, and there was still more of actual solemnity in his manner than Freda either approved or understood; “you shall take your own time, and all shall be done as you wish.”

“How nice you are!” she cried, and her lips brushed his hand as if she would have kissed it; but, in unconscious imitation of Undine, she left a light print of her two little front teeth there instead, and then laughed like a child at his surprised face.

“Don't mind,” she said hastily, and with a look of shame, “it wasn't a *real* bite; it didn't hurt!”

And then she smiled roguishly again.

“Freda,” he replied, “I want to talk to you seriously. My great object in life is to make you happy. There are two sorts of love, Freda: with one a man marries only to make himself happy; with the other he loves a woman so much that his thought is of her happiness, not of his own. I have

tried the first, and it failed utterly ; now I am going to try the second."

"But how did you try the first?"

He looked earnestly at her, and the colour spread slowly all over his pale face.

"I have been married before," he said slowly, and caught his breath as if there had been a little sob in it.

An expression of dismay came into Freda's eyes, and her lips parted with a sort of horror, though at first no sound came through them.

He watched her narrowly, and with a look of fear.

"Oh, I am so sorry!" she cried. "Oh, I do hope she wasn't nice! She *wasn't* as pretty as I am?"

"I was very unhappy," he replied; "it was a miserable marriage."

Freda clapped her rosy palms together, and danced a little.

"I am as glad as ever I can be," she cried, in a rapture. "I wouldn't have had you happy for the world. She made you unhappy; it was she made you unhappy—now wasn't it?"

"Yes," he answered, still narrowly regarding her; "it was she that made me unhappy."

"And it is I that will make you happy," cried Freda. "Oh, isn't that nice? isn't that delicious?"

"Then you do think about making me happy—not only about being happy yourself?"

This question seemed to puzzle her a little, and she thought before she answered it. After a minute she met his eyes frankly and nodded her head with decision.

"Yes, I know," she cried, "I'm selfish; but that will wear off; it's wearing off, and time will take it all away. We're selfish before we begin to think—when being alive is enough. We can't *help* being selfish, can we? We're so new to ourselves, and everything is so fresh and new, that it doesn't occur to us that we *have* to think of other people. We're we, and they are only they! But all that wears off and rubs away like polish; it *rubs* away, and after that we're never so selfish again. We are not quite so light-hearted as when

we're selfish, but I dare say we are happier."

Mr. Percival looked at her in utter amazement.

"Why, when did you think all this, Freda?"

"I didn't think it," she said; "it comes of itself. I've *known* it, I suppose, as it came, but I didn't *understand* it till just this minute; when you asked me that question, I saw how my selfishness was wearing away."

"I believe your theory is true," he said thoughtfully, "and that one expects too much of very young people."

"I haven't any theory," she replied, rather indignant; "I never had one about anything. I'm not sure that I know what a theory means exactly."

"My theory," he replied, smiling at her, "is, that we must start for S—— soon, or we shall lose the last return train."

"Oh, must we go back? wouldn't it be much nicer staying here? It will be rather tiresome having to tell them all, won't it?"

"I hope not," he replied gravely. "I

hope you have no reason to object to telling them."

"It's hardly fair; they'll all three say different things, and I shall only have the same thing to say! Oh, I do hope Corabel and Mr. Underwood will get married too."

"So do I," said Mr. Percival heartily. "I should like old Lewes to be happy."

"Old Lewes!" cried Freda, astonished.

He laughed, but gave no explanation.

Then a sudden thought struck her.

"Mr. Percival," she said, again sidling up to him, but hanging her head as if a little ashamed of herself, "will you mind telling me one thing?"

"What is it? I am sure I shan't mind telling you anything you like to ask."

"It is only—that I should like to know who you are."

But when he heard the question, notwithstanding the assurance he had just given her, he looked as if he did mind it very much indeed. He said not a word, and his face grew dark.

"Oh, I don't care about it a bit," she cried, all in a hurry; "not one bit. You're *you*—of

course that's enough for me, and of course you are all right. It's only because of Mr. Underwood; he worries so, and he goes on so. Such a fuss about our being two girls, and you being a man! Of course we're two girls and you are a man. There'd be no good in it at all but for that; but you have no idea how he worries when he begins, and I should have liked to have been able to answer him and make him shut up, that's all."

"I will tell you all about myself by-and-by, and I promise you that you shall be satisfied, and Mr. Underwood and everybody; but just now, if we do not make haste, we shall lose the train."

"I am quite satisfied as it is," answered Freda lightly, and so they passed out of the house and stood under the sky in the lovely summer twilight.

"Satisfied! what a word that is!" cried Mr. Percival, as he looked up into the fathomless depths of blue above his head, where the stars were just one by one beginning to peep out. "Satisfied! are we satisfied only with that sky and those stars? are we satisfied 'only!' What do I mean by that word?—are

we satisfied *ever* is what I should have said ? Do not we always require something more ? am I satisfied even now ?”

“ How can I tell ?” said Freda, with her young, careless laugh. “ *I* am, at any rate.”

“ And I might be,” he replied, “ when I think of what my feelings were when I entered that house behind us, and what they are as I recross its threshold ! And yet, what did we do inside, Freda ? We have given our lives away, and what will come of it ? Shall we never repent the words we spoke there—never ?”

She thought he was jesting, and again her sweet child’s laugh rang out. Then she became suddenly grave.

“ Is it not strange,” she said, “ to think we have each of us been married before ? You knew about me, of course ; but I hadn’t the least idea about you. Surely it is not fair ; a man should be made to proclaim himself a widower, just as much as a woman, a widow.”

Mr. Percival made no reply.

“ And that both our marriages should have been unhappy ! That is nice. It would be dreadful if we had either of us been happy ;

how glad I am you were miserable. How very, *very* strange it will seem to be happily married ; won't it ?”

“ Very, very strange indeed,” he answered her dreamily. “ Oh, Freda, do you think it ever *can* be ? it seems impossible.”

“ Yes, it seems impossible, but it isn't, because you know it is going to happen. I do wish I had not been married before. I hope you don't mind my being a widow. If I were a man, nothing on the face of the earth should induce me to marry a widow. I think it would be horrid. I am very glad you don't.”

“ I want *you*, Freda, and am content as long as I get you.”

“ I do wish Lionel Fane had never been born,” she said quietly. “ Since he is dead, there is no harm in wishing that, and it seems so useless that he should have been, since he is dead. It looks as if he had only been born to marry me, and it is such a pity.”

“ Will you mourn me in this way if I die ?” asked Mr. Percival in rather a troubled voice.

“ Don't be a goose. You are not going to die ; you know you are not. But there's some-

thing I want to say to you that I dislike saying very much indeed, and that I want to say of all things."

"Say it, my love. Don't be afraid to say things to me. Don't be afraid of me, Freda."

"Very well, I won't. I'll say it then if I can. What worries me most about him, and the chief reason why I wish he had never been born is—that I am almost sure it wasn't all him, but was partly me."

Mr. Percival regarded her with bewildered eyes.

"What wasn't all him, but partly you? what *are* you talking about?"

"Oh, how slow you are! the badness, of course. There's Duty. I never thought of Duty; but I know now that there *is* Duty, and I'm not at all sure that I always DID MY DUTY. He would have been horrid, you know, just the same. It wouldn't have made any real difference, only it would be more comfortable for me now, if I had. Don't you think it would be more comfortable?" she added very earnestly.

"Yes. I suppose it would," he answered her, with a little hesitation, even embarrass-

ment, and added suddenly, "Freda, what would you think if this Lionel Fane—this unfortunate husband of yours, was to come to life again? would you try to do your duty by him now if he did?"

She screamed and held up her hands as if to defend herself from some bodily visible enemy. "Oh no, no," she cried. "I would not," and then she began to cry.

They had reached the station, and he hastily tried to console her.

"It is very silly," she said, "but everything has been too much for me—one thing after another, and now this was the worst of all. I *couldn't* bear it; but I should not have minded your saying it if it hadn't been for all the rest." He put her into a carriage, and settling her most comfortably in the corner, told her to rest herself, and not to think about anything at all.

She smiled very sweetly at him, and said softly:

"Yes; it is delicious not thinking—not having conscious thoughts—*only* being happy."

She shut her eyes with an expression of ineffable content and repose on her lovely

face; the long, dark lashes rested on the delicate-tinted cheek, her little head fell back gently, not much, and in a minute she was fast asleep.

She slept as placidly and soundly as an innocent child tired after a game of play.

He regarded her for some time with intense tenderness, and even with joy. Then his face darkened. All of a sudden he looked frightened. The strong, brave man seemed to be seized with a panic of actual physical fear. He was thinking of the dreadful accident that had so recently happened, and in which this fair child had borne a part, and how her life might have been taken as well as another's, or she might be lying now at the inn they had left with broken limbs, or herself but a shocking indistinguishable thing. And here they were, again in a train, running the same risk, exposed to the same danger. A foolish desire to take her up in his protecting arms and make his escape took possession of him till he almost believed that he would do so at the next station, when such escape would become possible. Then his mood changed, and he thought to himself, "What have I done?"

what have we both done ? I knowingly ; she unconscious as an infant. How will it end ? Oh, Freda ! Freda ! how will it end ?" His face grew very gloomy, and he bit his lip with rage against himself. Why had he spoken ? Why had he not waited ?

Had he had any right to speak yet ? or as he had done ? Would Freda some day wish that she had been killed when the two rushing steam creatures met in that frantic, dreadful embrace ? Would he some day wish the same ? No, not so ; at least they had loved each other. At least they had told each other of their love. He had covered her sweet face with kisses ; he had held her to his heart, and she had lain in his arms unresisting and happy. That was something to live for. They should neither of them have died before that. But now--would it not be better, might it not be better now, if they never landed in port, and returned from this exquisite sea to a hard life of ordinary troubles and changes ; if at this instant the train dashed madly down an embankment, and crushed itself to death below, or broke itself up over some unexpected impediment in its desperate

journey ; and if they, knowing only that they were together, and that they loved, in that awful minute, were neither of them ever conscious of another ? Might not both look back, in the days of a far-away, dreadful future, and wish that such a fate had been theirs, that they had met a sudden beautiful death, rather than dragged on a miserable life ? He remembered his life for the last few years—he imagined a possible, a probable future, and he groaned aloud.

Here Freda laughed softly, and woke, looking round with her beautiful astonished eyes, till they rested on him, and recollection returned, and with it lovely blushes and shy, delighted glances.

“I was dreaming of you,” she cried, and there was a new cadence in her clear young voice, no one had ever heard in it before. “Oh, how sweet to wake to a life happier even than dreams !”

“I swear I will make your life happy, if man can bestow happiness on woman !” he exclaimed, catching joy and hope from those transparent eyes, and casting to the winds the thoughts that had so oppressed him.

“I hold both our lives in our hands,” he said to himself calmly and firmly; “with God’s help I will so shape them that she shall never reproach me, and that I need never reproach myself. I know my own faults of temper; I know hers. Am I a man, and fear the future?”

So his face grew almost as clear as hers, and his heart felt almost as light.

They were not far from S——, and now the train, to them quite unexpectedly, entered the station; and as it stopped, Percival felt a pang of regret. He would have liked to go on for ever, sitting opposite to Freda in that carriage, with no one to disturb them, and no life to live but just that.

He jumped out, and while he helped her to alight, Lewes Underwood’s voice addressed them.

“What a fright you have both given us!” he cried. “Maud is quite ill. Is she safe? Are you really unhurt, Freda? quite unhurt?” and he looked at her with eager, questioning eyes.

She shook herself lightly, as if it was the first time the question had occurred to her,

and she answered it gravely : " I am not hurt."

" We were in such a state when we got your note, and almost immediately afterwards heard of the accident. Frightfully exaggerated, of course ; nobody had escaped—everybody was killed—and a dozen people said that Mrs. Fane's name had been actually telegraphed as one of the passengers. I have been waiting here, sending telegrams for information, and getting none that I could rely on, or make anything of. Anna would have come with me, but Maud is really ill, and she could not leave her."

" Poor Maud ! I am sorry," replied Freda ; " she has suffered more than I have then, though she was not in the accident. Oh, do let us get home. I find I am tired. It seems to me years since I knew what it was to be asleep."

" You slept the whole way in the train," said Percival quietly.

" I !" she cried, with indignation ; " well, I do like that. I had not even my eyes shut, except for just a little half minute, when I took the least morsel of a doze. I was wide awake the whole time."

In saying which, Freda spoke what was not true, under the firm belief that she was speaking the truth. Hundreds of her fellow-creatures do the same, on the same subject, every day. By what strange law of our being is it that the most truthful people are permitted to utter the most barefaced lies, when the fact that they have been asleep is mentioned to them, nay, sometimes even to volunteer the lie? Who has not witnessed the opening of respected eyes, after a nap, in which sleep has taken an audible and unmistakable form, and heard the voice utter, before a syllable has been said on the affirmative side, "I was not asleep." Is sleep a sin? and if it is, is a sin diminished by being denied?

Mr. Underwood called a cab, and the three young people drove rapidly to the terrace, where Corabel opened the door to them, and flung herself on Mrs. Fane's neck with weeping exclamations of, "Oh, Freda! Freda!" Corabel, the calm and self-possessed. Freda laughed while she kissed her, but her tears mingled with her friend's.

"I am not a bit hurt," she said; "and as

I escaped, of course I was not in the least danger, so there is nothing to make a fuss about. Of course if I wasn't hurt, I was not really in more danger of *being* hurt, than you were in the drawing-room."

"That is nonsense," said Corabel, as they all went upstairs.

But Freda argued the point with obstinacy.

"It is not nonsense," she said, "it's sense—common sense. What is the danger? why, of being hurt; and if you are not hurt, you were not really in any danger of it. A thing can only be or not be."

"Oh, do be quiet; it doesn't signify. Come in to Maud."

"Then why did you say it, if it doesn't signify?" persisted Freda.

"I said nothing—did I?"

"Yes you did; you said nonsense."

"And you *talked* nonsense, so never mind. Come in to Maud. I saw you from the window, and told her you were safe, and then I ran down to open the door."

Maud kissed Freda very affectionately. She was lying on the sofa, looking pale and wan. She had fainted and been hysterical

during the period of alarm and suspense, and now her appearance brought back forcibly to Freda the first time she had ever seen her, when she lay on the couch in the Vicar's drawing-room, that night when he found Freda in the wood. She shut her eyes, and she saw vividly the pretty little hall, and herself in servant costume, crossing the threshold. "Sarah, Sarah!" she called out suddenly, and in so good an imitation of the Vicar's voice and manner that the others turned startled, looking first at her and then at him.

"Don't you remember it all?" she said. "How he called Sarah in the hall, and I thought your name was Sarah, and I was angry; and afterwards you called me Sarah in the morning, and I wouldn't go to you? I was determined nothing should make me go, and I conquered; I didn't, till you spoke without the Sarah."

What on earth was she talking about? They all looked at each other and at her in amazement. Was she going out of her mind? Then sudden light burst upon Lewes, and he said, quite proud of himself: "I know—our housemaid Sarah."

“ Yes, your housemaid Sarah. Do you not remember how you found me in the wood ? Do you not remember ? And what has become of Sarah ? It was her mother’s headache brought it all about. How is her mother ? has she headaches still ? And is Sarah still with you ? And oh, Mr. Underwood, do you remember how afraid you were of cook ? ”

She laughed gleefully, but the Vicar blushed, and Mr. Percival frowned, at the reminiscences. Maud, however, replied calmly : “ Sarah’s mother is still in very weak health, but Sarah has left us—she is married.”

“ Married ! ” cried Freda, “ how odd ! Does everybody marry ? ”

Maud blushed at that—her faint slight blush—and gave a pleased smile—that sort of smile, almost a simper, with which those who are “ engaged ” greet any reference to their peculiar position, especially if they become engaged, when for any reason they had given up ideas of the kind.

Freda suddenly became very white, and sank into a chair.

“ She is ill,” “ No wonder,” “ It has been

too much for her," cried three voices, and they came about her; but the fourth voice, which was the voice of Corabel, said quietly, "She is hungry."

An untasted meal—there had been too much agitation and anxiety in the house for the meals to be properly attended to—lay on the table, and Freda was soon restored to herself by a glass of wine and some judiciously administered chicken and ham.

When she had eaten and drank she told them she had had nothing to eat since breakfast, taken after she had left home at a railway-station, "and railway-station breakfasts are a mistake," she remarked philosophically. Mr. Percival declared it was very wrong and very bad for her, and no lady ought to keep uncertain hours—she had not strength for them. The others looked at him in some surprise, at the authority in his manner, and his having so much to say on the subject, but Freda answered calmly, "Why did not you stand treat for a dinner at the inn then?" whereat they all laughed, except Mr. Percival, who frowned, and coloured deeply.

It was these remarks about her having had no dinner that perhaps reminded them all, of how unexpected her absence from breakfast had been, and now questions were poured in upon her, to know where she had been, and why she had gone.

“I went to Exeter,” she said, “to see the cathedral.”

To Exeter! why that was fifty miles off! and without a word to any one—and without any one with her—how very, very wrong! what could she be thinking of? what could she mean by it?

She surveyed them all with her calm eyes till silence was restored, then she drew up her slight figure with a dignified air and said, in her clear ringing voice, “Am I not married? am not I mistress of this house? are not you all my guests? May I not go in and out as I like? Who has a right to control me?”

Not one of them said anything, because not one of them had anything to say. They all felt with a blank, numb sort of feeling, that nobody *had* a right to control her—that she must go in and out as she pleased, and that

she might even go away and live by herself, and not one of them had the power to prevent it. They might advise, and that was all they could do. And what a useless thing generally speaking advice is; and the best advice is more useless than the worst, because it is seldomer taken.

At last Maud spoke.

“Only it is so very unkind to frighten us so,” she said; and there were tears in her voice.

“And if you go about and do foolish things alone,” said Corabel severely, “people will cease to visit you; you must respect the opinion of the world, or it will not respect you.”

“That is a copy,” cried Freda, laughing, “or if it isn’t it ought to be. And as for the world, if it thinks it is not respectable to go to Exeter Cathedral, I can only say that I would rather *not* be respectable. Taken at the very best,” she added thoughtfully, “I think I had rather not be respectable.”

“I think you are tired now,” said the Vicar mildly, “and we can talk all this out another time. I am sure Mrs. Fane is too

sensible not to see that she is too young to go about by herself."

"I'm too young to be lame and helped about," laughed she, "and I am no more sensible than I am respectable. Oh, you dear people, don't be such a set of geese—please don't. I didn't mean anything by it, and all my tall talk was only fun. I just went away to see what you would do; the idea came into my head while I was asleep, and so I could not help myself, but I *had* to get up and dress as fast as possible. If I hadn't I should have been late for the train."

And she looked at them appealingly, as if the whole question had been about the rapidity of her toilet, and she felt they must agree with her now.

They could not help laughing, and inwardly they all felt relieved that she had not meant her "tall talk."

Then Freda drank some tea, and falling into a gentle reverie, hardly another word could be got from her, till Mr. Percival rose to take his leave, and Corabel declared she should carry her off to bed as she was evidently too tired to be allowed to sit up any longer.

Mr. Percival wished them all good-night before he came to her. When he did, she held out her hand to him without raising her eyes; and he held it a moment longer in his than was necessary, and bestowed on it a caressing pressure as he did so.

“I’ve changed my mind,” whispered she, and then snatching her hand from him, ran upstairs to bed.

The brother and sister were left alone.

“I never saw Freda look so pretty as she did to-night,” said Maud. “I suppose she was excited by the adventures she had gone through; but it seemed to me that there was quite a new expression in her face, and it was such a lovely expression too.”

Lewes had not gone through any particular adventures, and Maud was quite astonished when she had finished speaking to see how excited and unlike himself he looked. He walked hastily up and down the room in a disturbed manner.

“Lovely!” he cried, “she looked like an angel; *no one* ever saw that look in her face before; it was *too* beautiful; why can such things be? Oh, Maud, do you not see what

has happened ? is it possible you do not see what has happened ? I did almost at once."

"Happened ? no," she said ; " has anything happened ? what can you mean, Lewes ?"

"That fellow has offered and been accepted."

"Oh, Lewes !"

"I have not the least doubt of it."

"And that made her look so charming ? and so Freda will really be married again, and to a man she cares for ? I am glad she should be happy, but—poor Lionel Fane !"

"Ah, yes, poor Lionel Fane—poor, poor fellow !" cried the Vicar with astonishing bitterness ; "*he* never called that look into Freda's eyes, or that tint into her cheeks—nor he—nor any man alive—till this Percival. Who is he ? what is he ? how does he dare to woo her—and no one knows anything about him !"

"He is a gentleman—there cannot be a doubt of that," replied Maud, a little timidly, "and Corabel has quite a high opinion of him."

"Oh yes ! Corabel," cried the Vicar with a something in his voice that sounded like con-

tempt ; but he checked himself, perhaps a little shocked, and added, " Women never understand—*no woman does.*"

" Well, I don't know," said Maud meekly, " but I should think it would be very easy to find out all about him, and I do hope dear Freda is going to be really happy."

" And who is to find out ?" cried the Vicar, casting up his hands in the air rather wildly ; " who has the right to ask a single question ? who may control her ? No one ! What she said is perfectly true ; no one has any control over her. But it is a false position, it is a wrong state of affairs. Why, how old is she ? Nineteen ? a widow at nineteen—it is shameful."

" But nobody could help *that*," murmured Maud rather timidly—" poor Lionel Fane !"

" Poor Lionel Fane ! Oh yes ! poor Lionel Fane ; but he is dead ; his troubles are over. It is poor Freda Fane we have to think about now."

" Perhaps that lawyer—might not he——"

" Mr. Jones ? her husband's lawyer ? that detestable fellow—he would not put out his *little* finger to save her from drowning. He

hates her, and will be delighted to wash his hands of her and her concerns. This marriage is just what he would wish."

"I really hope and think that Mr. Percival——" began Maud, but her brother interrupted her hastily :

"Oh! pray say no more about him," he cried; "I am sick of the fellow's name. And if he marries her——"

"I declare, Lewes," cried Maud, with a little laugh of incredulity at her own jesting words, "any one would think you wanted to marry her yourself."



CHAPTER VI.

THE CONSEQUENCES.

THE next morning Freda woke as gay as a lark. The sun shone into her room, and she smiled and nodded to its brilliant rays in a joyful manner, with the most friendly little air imaginable.

“It is so sweet to be happy,” she said softly. Then she sprang from the bed, and ran lightly to the window, her bare, white feet glancing over the carpet. Her delighted eyes regarded the sea outside, which was advancing in leaping, sparkling waves as if it too was full of joy in the early morning light. Freda had a fellow-feeling with this beautiful dancing water, and kissed her hand to it two or three times. It seemed to her that the sea

was as happy as herself, and she felt full of gay sympathy with the waves.

Then she turned away from the window, and, kneeling down by it, said her prayers. After her usual prayers she lifted her lovely eyes towards heaven, and smiles broke out all over her face, while she whispered softly: "O God, let me be a good girl, and make him happy."

She did not pray for her own happiness, that seemed unnecessary; besides which, by the exalting power of true love, Freda was lifted out of herself, and thought of another alone. Her whole soul was filled with a yearning desire that she might be really good—good enough for him—good enough to make him happy. Her own joy or sorrow did not cause her a hope or a fear. Love is a great purifier.

After this she dressed herself, and went downstairs, where she found the others already assembled in the parlour; her slumbers having been long and sound after the fatigues and excitements of the previous day.

They all looked a little anxiously at her, but her manner was just as usual, and break-

fast went cheerfully on. Maud, from time to time, stole glances of inquiry at her, at Lewes, and at Corabel; she did not quite understand the position of the three towards each other, and her brother's manner, the night before, had made her uncomfortable. He appeared quite himself this morning, however; only, perhaps, a little more silent than usual.

"I wonder Mr. Percival has not come to breakfast," cried Freda suddenly, and then she pouted a little as if displeased.

"Why should he?" answered Corabel calmly; "he does not breakfast here every day."

"He might have wanted to know how I was."

"Probably he will call by-and-by to inquire."

"Yes; very probably indeed," said Freda; and she laughed roguishly.

Mr. Underwood regarded her in silence, and kept back a sigh, which he felt would be ridiculous.

Maud, meantime, was reading her letters, and looked eagerly up.

"I shall have a boxful of things sent

down to-day," she said—"things to choose from, all sorts of pretty garments, and fichus, and laces, and caps, and robes, *de chambre* and all those sort of articles; that will be pleasant work, will it not?"

"And I will choose too," cried Freda, clapping her hands, "and that will be heavenly. Why, Maud, I never recollected that part of it. A trousseau! Perhaps we shall run a race!"

Here she stopped abruptly, laughed, blushed, and hiding her face in her two little white hands, glanced through the rosy fingers at them all, to see what they thought about it.

There was silence round the breakfast-table, and three pair of eyes were fixed on her. Then Corabel came round to her, sat down by her, and put her arms about her waist.

"Is it really so, my dear?" she said, almost in a whisper.

Freda rested her head, with the hand-concealed face, on her friend's shoulder, and whispered back:

"Yes; it is really so."

And then again there was dead silence.

Freda was the first to break it ; she took her hands away from her face, sat upright, and looked round at her dumb audience.

“ Well,” she said, “ are you not glad ? Why should I mind telling you ? I am not ashamed,” with a ring of scorn in her voice at the word ; “ I am proud, I am happy.”

Maud got up at this, and came round in her turn to kiss her.

“ Oh ! I do hope you will be happy,” she said, and looked quite reproachfully at her brother.

“ You are engaged to Mr. Percival ?” he said gently.

“ Yes,” replied Freda, with a bright, bold look, and then hung her head and blushed.

“ It is a very short acquaintance, and you know so little of him,” he said deprecatingly.

“ Oh no ; I know him much better than I know you. Why, Mr. Underwood, how long had you known *me* when——”

But here Freda had the grace to stop, confused at what she found she was saying.

The Vicar appeared very uncomfortable and a little ashamed, but he commanded him-

self in a really creditable manner, and after a momentary pause, the awkwardness of which was extreme, he said quite coolly : " That is not a case in point ; it is quite a different matter. It is essential that a girl should know who a man is before she takes his name and accepts him as her guide and——"

" I am not going up Mont Blanc," interrupted Freda briskly, not to say pertly. " I don't want a guide, and it seems to me that what you require of me is, not to know what Mr. Percival is, but what his father was. Now I don't care a halfpenny about his father—I am not going to marry *him*."

" Do you know anything on the face of the earth about Mr. Percival?" cried Lewes, getting a little excited. " Where did he live before he came here ? Where has he ever lived ? Where did he come from ? What single incident of his past life do you know ?"

" What *does* it matter !" she cried impatiently ; " it is his present life signifies to me, not his past. And as long as he is here, what does it matter where he was when he wasn't here ? What do I know about him ? Well," she reflected for a few moments, " I *do* know

things!" she then cried triumphantly. "He has been in London, he told me so—there! And as to what he did—he has robbed orchards when he was a schoolboy, and roasted the apples in the fire; so I do know incidents in his life, you see."

"Oh yes," replied the Vicar dryly, "quite enough to marry on."

But none of them could tell whether Freda really thought she was strengthening her cause by what she said, or whether she talked her wild nonsense in jest. No one indeed ever did know, when she was joking or when she was in earnest, or whether she was a clever girl or a fool.

"Perhaps," said Corabel, "instead of disputing about these things, and only making Freda more determined, the best plan would be, for her to give Mr. Underwood permission to speak to Mr. Percival, as her friend, and learn in that way about him, and whether he has a profession, and what his income and position are, and all that."

"Indeed no," cried she indignantly; "I would not sanction anything so mean for the world!"

“Let her manage her own affairs,” said the Vicar, with fine scorn. “She has told us we have nothing to do with them, and it is quite true ; no one has any right to interfere.”

“Oh, how unkind !” she said instantly.

Mr. Underwood suppressed a smile, and went on in the same strain.

“I am the last man to wish to push myself forward, and act as a friend, when I am considered only as an acquaintance.”

“I wouldn’t have believed it of you !” cried Freda, very pathetically, and ready to cry ; “and when you wanted to marry me yourself !”

“Oh, hush, Freda !” exclaimed Corabel.

“Freda, how can you ?” remonstrated Maud. “You know he never did.”

“You should not worry me so,” said Freda to the Vicar. “What is it you want me to do ?”

“Let me say a few words to Mr. Percival as your friend.”

“I wonder who prevents you. Say as many as ever you like. Do you think I’ve taken out a patent for him, and that nobody may speak to him but myself ?”

“Then I have your permission?” he cried eagerly.

“Of course you have. I never *did* know such a fuss made about nothing at all. I couldn't have believed it. And then people pretend that men are less fussy, and have larger minds than women! I am sure no woman would have been so silly.”

“If you reflected for a moment, dear Freda,” said Maud, with all the superior wisdom of her age and her two months' engagement—“if you reflected for a moment what a very serious thing marriage is——”

“Oh, really now, that won't do from you, Maud,” cried Freda very quickly, “when I have been married before, and you haven't.”

This silenced Maud, who blushed a good deal, and had not another word to say.

“I don't see that there is any occasion to talk more about it,” remarked Corabel sensibly, “or to worry either Freda or ourselves. She has consented to Mr. Underwood speaking to Mr. Percival as her friend, and I am quite sure that all will be satisfactorily settled. For my part, I think you are

a very happy girl, Freda, to have at once such a lover and such a friend."

Freda jumped up and kissed her.

"And I am sure, Corabel," she cried gratefully, "that if you wished it, Mr. Percival would speak to Mr. Underwood in a minute too—only there could be no use in that," she added thoughtfully, "because we *do* know all about Mr. Underwood."

It was Corabel's turn to blush now, but she looked out of the window, and pretended she did not know what Freda was talking about.

Freda looked out of the window also, and roses stole into her cheeks, and a radiant light into her eyes, for she saw Mr. Percival walking on the sands.

"He is thinking of me," she whispered to herself; "he is waiting for me."

And she ran lightly on tiptoe from the room without saying a word to any of them, and so joined her lover on the shore.

"It is useless—it is hopeless," cried the Vicar. "She is wilful and obstinate, and I am quite sure that there is nothing that can be done."

“I am so sorry, so very sorry,” said Maud. “I can’t bear that Freda should be again unhappy. I wonder whether, if Arthur could come——”

Here Corabel interrupted her.

“I don’t agree with either of you,” she said calmly. “I neither see that the case is hopeless, nor that Freda need be unhappy if she marries him. Certainly, all we *do* know of him is in his favour, and why should we suppose that he is not a man of character and of means, when we have every reason for thinking that he is? And since Freda is willing that Mr. Underwood should act the part of a brother by her, we shall soon understand what he and his circumstances really are.”

“You have a very high opinion of this man,” said Mr. Underwood.

She reflected for a moment.

“Yes,” she answered, “I have. As far as I know and understand him, I have a very high opinion of him. He appears to me to be a much better stamp of *man* than any of the other gentlemen we have met here. I think myself he is a very superior person.”

“Time will show,” said Lewes, in a discontented manner.

While they were speaking Maud had left the room. She was not by any means strong, and the doubts and difficulties about Freda’s prospects, so different from the sweet smoothness of her own, worried and tired her, so she went to her own room, and refreshed herself by writing to her Arthur.

As soon as Corabel perceived that she was alone with the Vicar, she too prepared to leave him, but he detained her by continuing the conversation.

“I suppose,” he said, “my best plan will be to call on Mr. Percival, if he does not come in with Freda to luncheon; or if he does, I might walk home with him afterwards. There will be no chance of a private interview here with all you ladies about, and the sooner an understanding is come to the better; for every time he and she are together, will make breaking off the affair more difficult, if it *is* to be broken off.”

“His means *appear* to be ample, and he does not seem to have any profession; but of course he *may* have, as this is the holiday

time of year for all workers. However, Freda is well enough off for that to be of comparatively little consequence."

"Not in the eyes of the world," replied he hastily.

"I hope we don't care about the eyes of the world," said Corabel, with some scorn.

"The greater means *ought* to be on the man's side," pursued he. "A man cannot be quite happy in marriage unless he knows that he gives the woman a great deal more than he takes from her."

Corabel felt that they were treading on dangerous ground, and again she prepared to leave the room, and again the Vicar detained her.

"Anna," he said desperately, "you liked me once. You told me it was not by your wish I was dismissed. I do not blame your father. He was right to be ambitious for you, but perhaps it was from your liking me that his ambition was disappointed. I believe he would give you to me now—at any rate, you have no longer a duty to him. Do you think you could like me again, well enough to marry me, Anna?"

Her breast heaved, and her breath came fast, but she shook her head, and there was No in her face.

“That is all over,” she said in a low voice, but quite calmly; “that chapter is finished; we should vainly try to reopen it. You are very kind, and I am very much obliged to you, but it cannot be.”

“Will you try?” he said, sadly and earnestly; “the old feeling might come back if you tried.”

“Have you tried?” she cried quickly, her eyes flashing a little, and she shook her head again. “It will not do,” she added; “old feelings and old times will not return, any more than other dead things. They would be only cold pale ghosts if they did. You have loved Freda since those days.”

“I do not love her now; I love you only.”

“You think so; but that is because she is engaged to another man; if she had loved you instead——”

“When I came here I believed her entirely free, and I loved only you. I saw clearly


then the difference between what I had always felt for you, and ever felt for Freda."

"Yes," she said rather bitterly, "I saw the difference too. No, no, it will not do. You are sorry for me—you care for me now you see me poor, but that is not a feeling to marry on. I could not trust to it—it would not do."

She spoke kindly, sorrowfully, but very firmly; and a conviction entered Lewes Underwood's mind, that his case was hopeless—that she would never trust him, never love him again. He turned away for a moment, disappointed and in a sort of despair, and in that moment Corabel left him alone. When he turned back again, determined to urge his suit, she was gone. She would not even listen to him. He could not even console himself with the idea that :

"Who listens once will listen twice;
Be sure her heart is not of ice,
And one refusal no rebuff."

For she had not even listened once to him for a moment longer than was actually necessary; how could he flatter himself then



that she would listen twice, or that, in this case, one refusal was *not* a rebuff. The Vicar felt very low as he looked his future life in the face, and not the less low because he thought that his misfortunes were his own fault.

“ If it had not been for that infatuation,” he meditated, “ that three hours’ or three days’—which was it?—folly! if I had only been constant to her! But why should I be constant? Dismissed by her father, called extremely presumptuous for having dared to raise my eyes to her at all, and strictly prohibited from ever thinking of her again, was it fair to expect me to waste my life in useless regret, and never to care for another woman?”

But here he corrected himself, with the reasonableness and justice which were part of his nature. She had not expected it; she was not blaming him. Only as she had cause to believe he *had* forgotten her, and knew that he *had* asked another woman to marry him, she did not feel inclined to trust herself to his affection again. How could he expect her to believe in it? How could

he expect her to understand a state of mind which he was not by any means sure he understood himself? Oh, Freda! Freda! how much mischief you have done in your time! Here are himself, Lionel Fane, Anna—what perplexity or misery have you not brought on all? And what is to be the end of it? Yes, what is to be the end of it, even as far as you yourself are concerned? Who is this man you have chosen to fall in love with? This Percival? Who and what is he, that you prefer him to such a fellow as Lionel Fane? poor Lionel Fane!—killed—dead—buried—and no one to mourn for him, or to remember him, as such a man should be mourned for and remembered—at least by the woman he loved and married, if by no one else. Then Lewes Underwood's thoughts went back from Freda to himself and his own affairs. Was there really no hope for him? Would Anna—his Anna—never care for him again? Why should she not? If there was not love sufficient for her to marry him on, left from the old feeling, why should he not win her over again? He had won her once—every day men were

winning women—what was there to prevent his winning her? And surely the memory of the old love—if it now *was* only a memory—was a better foundation for affection than the empty blank of a fresh acquaintance. As to his passing fancy for Freda—here he sighed, and then felt angry with himself for doing so. Would he always sigh when he thought of that strange girl? of the night when he found her in the wood, and the summer morning—ah! that summer morning—when she gathered peas in his garden? Well, let it pass. But as to his passing fancy for Freda, Anna could not blame him for that; she might doubt his affection for her in consequence of it, and so refuse to marry him, but she could not think less of his character, or even of his powers of love and constancy, on that account. He had been refused without a hope or a chance for his future—refused because the woman he wished to make his wife was rich and he was poor, so that in constancy there would even have been meanness. Suppose Anna had married, could he have blamed her? Had he not been thinking of her as probably

married all these years ? And had she met him on a husband's arm, would she not have thought it the most natural and desirable thing possible to find him married too ? She could not blame him, or think less well of him because he had tried to forget her, and in a measure had succeeded ; but she might fairly doubt his affection, and believe it was more pity than love that had again brought him as a suitor before her. Courage then. He had perhaps only to convince her that he really loved her, that it was the most earnest desire of his heart to marry her ; and might he not hope to find, if he could do this, that she cared enough about him still to wish to marry him ? There had been no word, in her refusal, of a change in her. She appeared to be influenced only by the change in him. Let him persuade her, let him show her, that he was unchanged, and surely he might entertain the happiest hopes.

Then he wondered whether it would be a good plan to take Maud into his confidence, and employ her as his advocate, or at least get her to sound Anna and judge whether he *had* any chance or not. Maud was not

quick certainly, but then neither was she by any means deficient ; and just now her mental eyes were sharpened, at least on the subject of love, by her own happy engagement. Maud had the warmest and most admiring affection for him. She knew in a measure, and could fill up all she did not know from imagination, which probably would in no degree outstep the truth, how sincere his attachment had been, and how deeply and how long he had suffered. Moreover, she would make light of his affair with Freda—if affair it could be called—for she knew how short his acquaintance with her had been, how peculiar the circumstances, and how, almost as soon as he knew her at all, he had learned that she was the wife of his friend. The whole thing, too, having happened before her very eyes without her ever having detected that he cared for Mrs. Fane, would surely be good evidence in his favour, that much could not have happened, or much been felt. Here his conscience pricked him, and he stopped the line of thought, for memory became too vivid with her questions. What had happened ? merely that he had offered Freda

marriage. What had he felt? simply the desire to overleap all sort of barriers that hemmed him in, both as a gentleman and a clergyman, and to make a servant-girl his wife.

Mr. Underwood walked rapidly about the room, in order to get rid, if possible, of the uncomfortable sensations he experienced, as these thoughts took hold of him. And another objection to employing Maud's services was, that he did not at all wish to give her his confidence, or to say one word to her about his folly. Did she guess anything? Certainly she had no suspicion till they came here, and he doubted whether she had felt more than an occasional vague wonder, every now and then, since. Dear Maud was *not* quick, and what a blessing it is to men, now and then, when their women-kind are *not* quick. He thought Maud would be astonished and shocked if he told her he had offered marriage to Freda, believing her to be a servant-girl, and that her faith in him would probably be shaken for ever. Yet, unless she knew the particulars of this unlucky episode in his life, or at least

knew that such an episode existed, her advocacy would be worse than useless, for her one line of thought and speech would be the unchanged and unchangeable constancy of his affection. Again he walked about the room, perplexed and disturbed, and feeling angry with Maud, though he knew that in justice his anger should only have been directed against himself.

It was very aggravating that Maud had taken up the idea of making such a fuss about his constancy, and of constancy being the one thing that must make an impression upon a woman's heart. He wondered whether Arthur had indeed been as constant to her as she believed, and whether no airy dream or fascinating vision had once turned his thoughts from her during all those years of absence. Even supposing this to be the case, it was different with Arthur from what it had been with him. Arthur had never been contemptuously refused because he was a poor man ; he had voluntarily retired from the encounter without making a single attempt to win the prize ; and the Vicar repeated to himself, with some scorn :

“ His deserts are small
Who will not put it to the touch,
To win or lose it all.”

And as to Maud's own constancy, really it was very strange that she laid such a weight on the quality, when her whole youth had been given up to an affection for one man, while she had gladly and happily accepted another when he asked her.

Poor Fane!—poor fellow!—his had been a wrecked life and a miserable death, and nobody mourned him now, or would care to see him, could he come back to life again.

Here were these two women, one of whom had loved, and the other had married him. Both were happy in their affection for other men. To one, if he appeared this minute, his resurrection would be a matter of placid indifference; to the other it would be the direst misfortune that could happen to her. Poor fellow!—poor Lionel Fane!—it is thus, then, that we are loved and mourned by our women—by our women, who, in us, esteem inconstancy as the greatest of sins.

The Vicar mused in a melancholy way, and

felt as if he should like to get rid of it all and go away for a while to the Baltic—the centre of Africa—New South Wales—anywhere—he did not care where, provided he could shake off, and leave behind him the complications of civilisation and domestic life.

He looked out of the window. The sun shone brightly on the blue sea, that sent up fresh fountains of living spray against the rocks. Below there, on the sands, Freda had joined her lover. The two stood laughing, as if in pure delight, at the happiness of earth and life. Everything looked as if made only for love and joy. No one could dream that those gentle, sparkling, dancing waves held danger and death within them. No one could dream that in the hearts of that man and that woman might lurk passions and tempers that could work their own or each other's destruction.

Where was Maud? Writing to her Arthur, above in her own room—as different from the Maud of a few months ago as a rose in full bloom is to one blighted in the bud; and this change was wrought by the

mere fact, that the man she was writing to was her Arthur, and that she had promised to be his wife.

And Corabel? No—she had no such joy in her heart and in her eyes, neither had he. They two were different from the other four. To them life was a blank, and each carried a yearning longing in their hearts for the one thing they had not got.

And why should this continue to be the case?

Anna had loved him once. It was clear to him he had no rivals—it was not that which caused her refusal; and so he bravely determined that she should love him again. He would not give her up. He would not be piqued, or worried, or discouraged, and so like a fool, or a child, throw away the one great bliss of life that might be his. He would woo her calmly and steadily; and, with the help of God, he would win her at last. He would fully confess his fault, if it had been a fault; he would explain to her exactly how that fault had been committed, and for how very short a time the thought of Freda had occupied his heart, and how his whole

earthly happiness now, and for ever, depended on Anna and on Anna alone. He would do all this; and he believed that in the end he should be successful, and that he and Corabel were not to be the only pair left out of the one earthly paradise—the paradise of a happy marriage.

Meantime Maud, upstairs, in placid, sweet content, wrote her letter—the most modest and womanly of love-letters, if not the most romantic or impassioned. She dwelt gladly on Arthur's successes, and the pride she felt in his profession; and she told a little, touching lightly here and there, of her present life. She hinted at the box of pretty things she expected by the afternoon train. She praised Freda, described Corabel, and said dear Lewes did not seem quite comfortable, or quite himself, and she wondered what he had better do. She was not anxious; she did not suppose there was anything really amiss, but she wondered whether he ought to leave off drinking porter, or whether there was too long an interval between his luncheon and his dinner. What did Arthur think? Ah, if Arthur were only here he would know

directly, and tell her what it would be best for him to do.

And Corabel, when she had left the Vicar, ran hastily up into her bed-chamber, and paced the floor with as much haste and agitation as Lewes paced the floor in the room below. Her pale, fair face was flushed; her lips trembled, and her eyes looked unnaturally bright. She, who had been so calm and quiet while with him. She ran to the mirror on the dressing-table, pushed the hair back with both her hands from her hot brow, and looked earnestly at her face in the glass. Then she gave a melancholy sort of little smile at her folly in doing this, and moved restlessly away.

“She is so beautiful,” she said, “and so fascinating, and so original! Who that has cared for her, could love any one else? He is kind; he is good—the best, the very best of men. God bless your good heart, Lewes Underwood. But I am not to be had for pity—nay, not even if the pity is for your own loneliness as well as for mine. Why did she come across him,” she mused on, “with her wonderful beauty and charming ways? Even

now, is he free from them? Is not there still a string in his heart that only she can waken? Is there not? Is there not?"

Then Corabel grew calm and quiet again, and smiled, a little more naturally, at herself and her agitation.

"How strangely it has all happened," she thought, "and how strangely we [have been brought together again; and if not for *that*, for what then, I wonder! Why have not our lives continued to drift further and further apart—as the lives of hundreds and thousands have done, who, however near they may have been, once severed, have never, never met again, or, if they have met, it has been as strangers? What shall I do? What ought I to do? What can I do? When Freda is married I don't think I shall like to live with her. I should really degenerate then into the friend-companion, not the companion-friend. Married to a man she loves, she would want me only to be of use to her, or would not want me at all. Ah, he sees that, as I do—more than I do, for I have hardly thought of it before; and *he* has, and would give me, a happy home when I am homeless. Good

kind man. But it must not be—it must not be—unless——”

But here Corabel stopped. She was not going to allow her thoughts to run wildly on into the unknown and impossible paradises that the “unless” which begins unfinished sentences might have led to. For Corabel had a well-disciplined mind, and was able to restrain her thoughts.



CHAPTER VII.

THE VICAR DEPARTS.

WE have said a good deal about the thoughts and feelings of all the little party assembled at S—, with one exception, and that exception is a very important person—the man whose engagement to Freda had been the cause of so much disturbance to the other four. Mr. Percival's state of mind we can only guess at; but it was strange surely that he had not called that morning on his affianced bride. Perhaps he had walked about on the sands near her window in order that she might do, what she actually did, join him there; but if so, it was certainly leaving the initiative

more in the lady's hands than is usual with a lover in such very early days of acceptance. Moreover, when Freda joined him on the shore his face was overcast, and the expression of his eyes gloomy.

She almost ran up to him, in her splendid beauty, fresh, bright, and happy.

His face could not but clear as their eyes met, and the clouds in his disperse before the unclouded light in hers.

"Ah, Freda," he cried hastily, "is it well with you? are you content? Did you sleep? and what was your impression as you woke? was it of joy?"

"That would be telling," cried she, gaily placing a slender finger on her rosy, pouting lips.

"Have you told them all?"

"Yes. I have told them."

"Well?"

"Oh, they were rather nasty about it; they don't seem to see it exactly."

Mr. Percival gave a low laugh.

"What, my friend Corabel! Has she turned traitor?"

"Corabel was the best, and Maud was not

bad. She kissed me too. But Mr. Underwood is horrid. He goes on and on about not knowing you, and who you are, till one begins to think you are somebody dressed up, or a genteel swindler, or that sort of thing. Don't you know?"

"Poor old fellow!" cried Mr. Percival, and again he gave that low laugh.

"You are very good-natured about it," said she, looking in his face with pleased eyes "and I am glad. I like people to be good-natured, and to take life easily. It is so *much* pleasanter than making a fuss."

"I am afraid I am not generally considered a very good-natured man."

"Oh yes, you are; at least, *I* consider you so, and that is all that signifies now; but, Mr. Percival, your good-nature will be tried a little, for Mr. Underwood is going to—ask you a few questions!"

"You don't say so; how very alarming!"

"You won't mind, will you? He wants to know whether you have any profession? and how much money you've got?"

"And you, Freda—Mrs. Fane—don't you want to know, too?"

“ I ? not a bit ; what does it matter ? You seem to have money enough to live on. You dress very well,” regarding him approvingly ; “ but if you had not, it is of no consequence, for I have plenty for both, and for a great many more people besides.”

He looked at her curiously.

“ You are quite indifferent to money, then ? ”

“ I don't know about that. One must have enough to live on, of course ; but, after that, I don't much care. I like spending money, of all things. But it is delightful at Roseberry Farm, where you have poultry and cows and all you require, and never spend any money at all. Here you want money ; there you don't ; so the question is only just where you will live ; not whether you like money. Don't you see ? ”

He laughed.

“ Yes,” said he, “ I see ; but your ideas are not common. I wonder how they would wear ? I wonder how you would like to live always at Roseberry Farm, with poultry and cows and all you require, without money ? ”

“ I should like it immensely. That is if

you were there. I should tire of it with Letty and Jack. I love them dearly, and they are as nice as ever they can be, only they get tiresome after a while."

"If I had no money, and you were to lose yours, and we had to support ourselves? Ah, Freda, you could not play with your life then."

"I don't want to play with my life, do I? I would be a hospital nurse—did not I tell you I wanted to be one?"

"And if you were a hospital nurse, what should I be?"

"Oh, you could be a doctor; or if you are not clever enough for that, you could be one of the porters. Yes," she cried, with enthusiasm, "that would be delightful; better than anything. You would sit in a big chair in the hall and make people write their names in a big book—I wonder what the use of it is!—and I would run in and out to you from the wards for a laugh and a word; and then in the evenings we would have a little, little bit of a sitting-room, and eat bread and cheese for supper—only just our two selves—and be as happy as a king and a queen, or a good

deal happier than any of the history kings and queens I read about at Clapham."

As they strolled up, from the sands, towards their terrace they met a gentleman coming from the promenade, who stared very hard at Freda. But Freda was accustomed to be stared at, and was too much occupied by the perfect happiness of the life she was imagining to pay any attention to the passers-by. This man, who was young and good-looking, turned hastily round, repassed her, and then turned round to peep at her again in a manner in which some men indulge themselves when a pretty girl is in question, and which Mr. Percival considered extremely impertinent.

"I would have knocked that fellow down in another minute," he said irately, after each was again pursuing their way.

"What fellow?" cried Freda naturally, but improperly glancing for an instant over her shoulder.

"For the love of Heaven don't look back at him," cried he with sudden passion; "what are you thinking of?"

Freda's face became scarlet, and then as white as a sheet.

“ You know him ?” he cried.

“ No, no, I don't think I do ; but you spoke like— Oh, whatever you do, don't speak like *that* again.”

Mr. Percival looked at her with doubt and suspicion. It seemed to him that she had recognised the man, and that his appearance had called up a sudden and unaccountable agitation in her. He thrust his hands deep down into his trousers' pockets, and walked on moodily.

Freda seemed pensive, and glanced rather timidly at him.

“ Mr. Percival,” said she at last earnestly, “ I hope you are not ill-tempered. I *don't* like ill-tempered men. I don't, indeed.”

He raised his eyes and looked full at her. He gave himself a little shake, and could not help smiling at her words, and the seriousness of her gaze.

“ I hope I am not ill-tempered,” he said ; “ but I don't think I am a smooth man.”

“ Oh !” she cried, as if in fear. “ I hope— I hope you are *not* ill-tempered !”

“ If you love me and trust me, Freda, I

am sure I shall never be ill-tempered to you. If you do not——”

“Ah, but I do ; I do,” she cried gaily. “I am so glad—so glad. That is a comfort then ; and *as* I trust you, I believe what you say.”

He looked at her very earnestly, and very kindly and gently.

“Yes,” he said. “Believe me, and I will believe you. I do think we may be happy together.”

“Come in,” she cried ; “they are all in there.”

“No—not now—not to-day.”

“Oh ! but you must come this evening, then.”

“Not this evening, Freda. I have to go up to London by the next train. I have some business to do, and must see my lawyer. I shall return by the evening train to-morrow, and will dine with you if you like.”

“Very well. I shall expect you at seven o'clock. Now I shall tell Mr. Underwood you have got a lawyer. That will be some satisfaction to him, poor dear ; though, for my part, I hate lawyers, and can't imagine

why there are any. I have got one too, and he is horrid."

The lovers parted on the door-steps, and Freda ran upstairs, singing :

“ Oh ! sorrowful grass,
Must you wither and die,
While shadow-lights pass
O'er the fields where you lie ;
While little birds sing
In the branches above,
And everything
Is illumined by love ?
Oh ! sorrowful, sorrowful, sorrowful grass !”

She entered the drawing-room with the last words dying away on her lips : “ Sorrowful, sorrowful grass !” and was rather surprised by the eager manner in which Mr. Underwood met her at the threshold of the door.

“ Where is he ?” he cried.

“ He ? who ?” replied Freda innocently, and looking round her with eyes downcast as if in search of a cat or a dog.

“ Mr. Percival. Has he not come in with you ? Is he not coming ?”

“ Not that I know of—why should he ?”

The Vicar was a little taken aback.

“ Well, really, Mrs. Fane, I only mean that under the circumstances it might have been natural.”

“ I don't quite see that. A man may be *de trop*. Don't you think there is often a little bad taste in carrying that sort of thing too far ?” she spoke very demurely, with a mischievous light dancing in her eyes.

“ He will dine here doubtless to-day,” said the discomfited clergyman.

“ Will he ? He did not tell me so.”

“ You know, Freda, that I particularly wished to speak to him. Very well, I shall go and call on him, then,” and he prepared to leave the room.

“ No use, my dear friend ; not a bit of use. He has gone to London.”

“ Gone to London ? How very extraordinary ! This really looks like——”

“ Like running away from you ? yes, does it not ? It has an uncomfortable appearance. It makes me very, very uneasy. But I have something to tell you, Mr. Underwood, that will almost atone for it. He has a lawyer ! Yes, he has indeed ! and it is to see his lawyer that he has gone to London.

Now that is really a respectable thing, is not it?"

"I am the more sorry that he is gone away, because I am obliged to leave you to-morrow morning," said the Vicar, after a moment's silence, rather stiffly.

Freda's eyes opened wide, and she changed her manner and became in earnest at once.

"Oh, not really," she cried sorrowfully; you are not angry, are you? you can't be angry because Mr. Percival has gone to London?"

"No, Freda, I am not angry; but being obliged to leave you, I am extremely sorry not to be able to have a little conversation with him, before I go."

"But why are you obliged to go?"

"I had a telegram while you were out telling me that Mrs. Leslie, a parishioner of mine, and a very dear friend, is ill and wants me, so go I must."

"Well, I *am* sorry! However, I hope you need not stay long; you will come back to us and Maud."

He shook his head.

"Maud is going with me. Mrs. Leslie

and she are great friends. They knew each other as girls, and now the Leslies live in my parish. The fact is that the poor young lady is to undergo an operation the day after to-morrow, and she wants us both. She has neither mother nor sister to be with her, and Maud is as necessary in one way as I am in another."

"Oh, how shocking! but I hope Maud will not be with her. She is so delicate and nervous—you know my being only lost made her ill. I think this would kill her."

"No, she will not be with her at the time, but she will before, and afterwards. We had promised long ago, but no one had an idea it would be fixed for so early a day. We thought it would be in about a month."

"But you will come back?"

"I am afraid not. You see there is a good deal to be done of one sort and another before the wedding, and it is a long journey. I hardly see how we can manage it. But, Freda, you know you will be coming to us for that self-same wedding, you and—and Corabel, so we shall meet again before very long."

“Yes, that will be delightful. And of course I may bring Mr. Percival.”

“Oh, Freda! I do regret that I cannot speak to him—cannot ask him a single question before I go. It is most unlucky. May I write to him?”

“Bless the man! of course you may. You don't suppose I interfere with his correspondence? not yet, at any rate; and I greatly doubt whether I ever shall. I have strong suspicions about his temper.”

Mr. Underwood looked at her in dismay.

“You actually doubt his temper?” he said. She laughed gleefully.

“Never mind,” she cried; “if I don't care, I am sure you need not.”

“Freda, can you be serious for a single moment, when the happiness of your whole future life is at stake? Will you authorise me to write to him as your friend? May I say that I stand in the place of a guardian to you?”

“Yes, you may,” she answered, made serious by the earnestness of his manner, and feeling the affection that caused it to be earnest. “Only *don't* be nasty; don't worry

him with mean questions about money—promise me you won't."

"I promise you that I will ask nothing that one gentleman, and man of honour, may not ask of another!"

And the grandeur of the words and solemnity with which they were spoken actually awed Freda into silence—a silence which, wonderful as it may seem, was not broken by her, but by him.

"When does he come back?" he asked.

"To-morrow, to dinner," replied Freda meekly.

"Well, Freda, I strongly recommend you to leave this place. It really is not right for you and Miss Bell to live here and receive gentlemen alone."

"Such nonsense, when we are to be married, and then it will be he, who will receive people along with us!"

"I will speak to Anna, and see what can be done," thought Mr. Underwood; but he had tact enough, though a man, only to think this, and not to say a word like it to Freda. He knew that if she thought he was going to talk her affairs over with Corabel,

and arrange what it would be wisest, discreetest, best, for her to do, she would be up in arms in a minute, and defy him.

“As to my leaving this, it is out of the question, you know,” she said simply, “for I promised Benjamin I would not.”

“But that is folly!” cried he. “You can’t spend your whole life here because of that poor boy.”

“I can spend his life here,” she replied sadly; “and I must, too, because I promised him.”

“I am often inclined to wash my hands of your affairs altogether and have done with them, Freda; you are so unreasonable.”

She glanced roguishly at his large, manly, but by no means handsome hands, and then caressed her own pretty little white ones for a moment.

“I wonder who is unreasonable now,” she said in a pitiful voice.

“I don’t think I am. I don’t want to be. I want nothing but your good. I——”

“Oh, how horrid!” cried Freda. “I do hate people who want nothing but my good!”

“Very well,” he said, in a resigned way.

“ I will do the best I can for you, and help you in spite of yourself.”

“ Now you are nice. That is what I really like. It’s delicious to be helped in spite of myself ; it is like betting. Mr. Underwood, don’t you bet sometimes ? I adore it. Now what odds will you take that Mr. Percival isn’t respectable ?” And she laughed her little refined laugh, and spoke in a delicate voice, in striking contrast to her rather vulgar words, and reminded the Vicar so vividly of Freda the servant-girl, and that wonderfully sweet and intoxicating three days’ dream, that he hardly knew what to do, and felt that it might indeed be better if he at once did really wash his hands of her affairs and had nothing more to do with her.

And it was just at this moment that Corabel opened the door, and entered the room.

Perhaps she was startled by the way in which they stood talking together, or it may have been by something in his face, but she drew back, blushing painfully, and saying : “ I beg your pardon. I am afraid I intrude —I interrupt you.”

The Vicar was out of countenance and embarrassed, but Freda was as cool and composed as a newly-blown rose.

“Not in the least, my dear; pray come in. Do you know that this tiresome man is going away to-morrow?”

The deep blush faded out of Corabel's cheeks, and left her considerably paler than she had been before. She thought, naturally enough, this was her doing. The Vicar had made his offer, and received his refusal, and so he was going away, and would trouble her no more. Of course he was; it was the most manly thing to do under the circumstances, and therefore Lewes Underwood was sure to do it. Any possibility of a nearer connection was closed between them for ever. It was all over, and could never be revived. Yes, there he stood—the man who had once been so dear to her; and it had been in her power to be at this moment his engaged wife; and she had herself wished to be nothing to him. What did this yearning and aching sensation in her heart mean? Was she regretting what she had done, now that it was too late? Would, could, any

woman on earth be happier than that man's wife ?

She composed herself in a minute, and smiled that painful smile we all of us have seen on the faces of others, and some of us have felt on our own, while she said, with a little constraint in her voice as she could manage to show there :

“ I am sorry. Is Maud going too ? ”

“ Yes ; Maud is going too. Is not it tiresome ? Some woman chooses to have an operation a month too soon, and they have to go and help.”

Corabel looked bewildered at this lucid explanation, and could not help turning to the Vicar for an explanation.

He answered her inquiring glance a little sadly.

“ Yes,” he said ; “ it is quite true. A parishioner of mine and dear friend of Maud's is ill, and we promised her we would not forsake her if she needed us. Her husband has sent me a telegram, and we go to-morrow.”

“ I can't think why people are not always well,” cried Freda. “ I am sure if they did

not give way they *needn't* be ill. Health *must* be the natural condition of mankind."

"Of course," replied Corabel with unusual sharpness. "I always wondered why you chose to have that fever in Jamaica."

"Oh, Corabel, when I was so very ill! How unkind! That really is inhuman. I am astonished at you; are not you, Mr. Underwood? Don't you think Corabel is very hard-hearted?"

"Yes, I confess I do," he replied in a low voice. "Sometimes, at least."

Corabel blushed and sighed, and the Vicar echoed her sigh. Again she doubted whether she had really acted for the best; whether she had really thought of his happiness and her own, or whether she had been influenced by pique and pride. No, surely not; only by self-respect and good sense. How could she agree to marry him when she was not sure what the motives were that induced him to wish to marry her; nay, even when she was not sure whether he was not still in love with Freda? Sometimes she felt almost certain that he had *not* freed himself from that infatuation; at other times she believed

that he had; but while his own conduct, looks, and words kept the matter in doubt, how was it possible that she should consent to be his wife? No, he must go; and their lives must drift asunder; they must never more be anything to each other—never more.

Then Freda told her that Mr. Percival had gone to London, and was not to return till the next night, and that Mr. Underwood was in a great state of mind, because he was so fond of him he could not bear to think that he was not to see him again for some time; but that she was doing her best to cheer him up about it, and was consoling him with the idea that they could correspond.

“But you know, Mr. Underwood,” she cried, “I shall read all your letters, and write his; so that, after all, you might just as well correspond with me, unless you think it improper.”

“I cannot let this engagement go on (if I can help it),” said the Vicar very gravely to Miss Bell, “without letting Mr. Percival see that Mrs. Fane has some friend to protect her; and Mrs. Fane has kindly permitted

me to assume the position of guardian friend."

"He did worry so," Freda explained, apologetically, to Corabel, "that I couldn't help myself. Of course, I shall take care Mr. Percival understands that; and I'm sure he'll make allowances."

Then she looked at Corabel, touched her forehead lightly but significantly, and nodded in a marked way at the Vicar, as if to make her friend understand that she thought he was a little deficient.

The party at dinner that evening was not a very cheerful one. The Vicar and Corabel were both of them absent and preoccupied, and Maud was sorry to leave Freda, especially at such an interesting moment, when they were naturally drawn together, and had so many subjects of common interest; and she was also nervous and unhappy at the thought of what lay before her. Maud had none of Freda's power of losing recollection of herself, when brought into contact with sickness. She was painfully conscious of herself, every moment that she was in a sick-room, of how sad or trying everything was,

and of just how every sad and trying thing was likely to affect her, or did affect her. She never for an instant thought of not going to Mrs. Leslie because of this, nor would it have prevented her nursing any one who had a claim on either her duty or her humanity; but nursing was to her an irksome task, not a labour of love, and she would at any time infinitely rather be the patient than the nurse.

While her three companions were, therefore, all a little silent and dull, Freda was gay enough, her heart being light with its newly-discovered happiness; but one person out of four cannot always keep up a conversation; though if such a feat were possible, I think Freda was certainly the one person who *could* have performed it.

“Oh!” she suddenly cried, “how dull you are! Why are you all so dull? What is the use of life if its little *contretemps* are to make us dull? Is not *that* worse than anything? Is not it stupid to let the thing caused be worse than the thing that causes it? If it is bad that you two dear people must go away to-morrow, why should

we make it worse by being so dreary to-day, when if you had not been going, it would have been all joy?"

"But would it have been all joy?" interrupted Corabel gravely.

"I don't know what is the matter with *you*," retorted Freda. "You were nice enough till *he* came;" and she signed with her head towards the Vicar, causing her three companions all to colour in different ways and with different feelings, while her own cheeks alone retained their natural rose hue, cool and undisturbed.

"You won't improve us by personal remarks, my dear," said Corabel, as lightly as she could manage to speak. "That is not the way to make dull people entertaining."

"We ought all of us to be charming to-night," cried Freda, forcing a pretty little affected yawn, "because we are to be separated to-morrow. Instead of which we are all horrid. Oh, dear creatures, I do wonder whether there is any good in being alive at all. Do you really think there is? I am *sure* there isn't for stupid people; and if we are going to be stupid, it's just the same for us. I wonder

whether I *shall* ever be really stupid ? I am sure I had rather not be alive if I shall."

"I am sure I don't know whether it is worse to be stupid than to be silly," said Corabel quietly.

Perhaps Corabel was in rather an uncomfortable humour that evening.

Freda stared at her.

"Oh! you must be joking," she said. "No one *could* really doubt about *that*. Everybody knows it is *nice* to be silly, and very pleasant; but only stupid people don't mind about being stupid, and *that* is just because they are too stupid to care."

"Stupidity is a very safe quality," said the Vicar, trying to rouse himself and join in the conversation. "It is a great guard against many temptations, and takes a person through life in a quiet and satisfactory manner. There are many worse qualities going than stupidity, in my opinion."

"And there is nothing worse in mine," cried Freda very earnestly. "It is bad for the possessor, and worse for his friends. No one has any *right* to be stupid. You may be as wicked as you please, and rather add to

the entertainment of others ; but one must not even laugh at a stupid person, because it would be cruelty to animals."

" I wonder whether you are ever going to give Miss Underwood the signal for a move to the next room ?" said Corabel with resignation.

On this hint, the three young ladies went away, and the Vicar was left alone to crack his nuts and drink his glass of wine in gloomy meditation. It was not long before he sought the drawing-room ; and Freda proposing that they should all go down to the sands, the next hour did not pass as slowly as the last.

Freda put her hand through Maud's arm, and led her on in front ; so that, without any manœuvring—if he would have manœuvred—the Vicar found himself *tête-à-tête* with Miss Bell. She looked round her as if for escape ; but seeing there was none, resigned herself to her fate, determined to make the best of it, and, at all events, not to show that she disliked or felt any awkwardness in the position.

Mr. Underwood made no attempt, however,

to resume the subject of the last conversation they had held together. He spoke only of the engagement between Freda and Mr. Percival.

“ I lament extremely that he is away to-day, and that I leave before his return,” he said, after a few preliminary remarks ; “ for Mrs. Fane has consented that I should act for her on this occasion, and though I shall write, writing is never so satisfactory as a face to face conversation.”

“ I cannot think myself there is anything mysterious in Mr. Percival. I like him very much, as you know ; and I believe everything will come out right about him. He had no one to talk business with, and you would hardly expect Freda’s lover to begin transacting business with her before they have been engaged twenty-four hours.”

The Vicar suspected a *souçon* of malice in the last remark. He winced thereat, but wisely forbore to take any notice of it.

“ I hope you will kindly allow me to say,” he replied, clearing his throat, “ that when we are gone, the situation will be an—awkward one, and that the sooner Mrs. Fane

leaves this, and meets Mr. Percival in general society and a different sort of place, the better."

"But how are we to find that place?" asked Corabel calmly. "And why should we meet Mr. Percival more in general society in any other place than in this? At first we met him at balls and parties, and becoming intimate with him, he called here."

"He called here without any further introduction than meeting you at balls?"

"He asked to be introduced to me at the first ball he appeared at; Freda did not dance with him, but she took a great fancy to him even then," said Corabel, a little mischievously. "I really think she was—interested—in him before he was in her. Then she lost herself—she went out before sunrise, and walked by the cliff; and he found her in his garden and came home with her, and it was not until after that he called."

The Vicar gave a sort of hopeless sigh.

"Such a way of becoming acquainted does not make me feel more comfortable, Miss Bell, nor does it give me more confidence in this little household kept by two young ladies."

“I am not so very young,” she replied, with a heightened colour, “and Freda is a widow. That makes all the difference in the eyes of the world, Mr. Underwood; and why should it not content you? A widow, however young and pretty, may receive, in her own house, especially if she has a companion living with her.”

“But then if the companion is young and pretty too? A middle-aged companion, and married, or a widow herself, would be the proper person for Mrs. Fane’s companion.”

Corabel took no notice of the compliment, but laughed at the idea he presented to her of Freda living with a middle-aged widow.

“She would only play her tricks and make game of her—it could not be. Any one can plan impossibilities, but the wise thing is to make the best of the circumstances that really exist. The circumstance we have to deal with is—Freda! and though I may be, in your opinion, a bad and unsuitable companion for her, if she will not take a better, her friends must put up with me.”

“You say that only to vex me,” he cried, hurt; “you know quite well what I mean.”

“At any rate this state of affairs won't last long, you may comfort yourself with that. I don't think Mr. Percival will be a patient lover, and he is gradually acquiring an ascendancy over Freda that will give him influence enough to carry his point. They will marry soon.”

“Can any man subdue Freda's will?”

“I think so. She has never loved before; she loves now; but it is only a budding affection as yet. Freda married and loving—as she can love—her husband, will very probably be his slave. I think that is quite on the cards.”

“If her husband is only worthy of her affection, and only influences for her good.”

“Let us hope that will be the case.”

“She has authorised me to write to him.”

“Yes, I am very glad of that; you can ask him any questions that you like, and I cannot but believe that he will answer them satisfactorily, and that your mind will be set at rest.”

“And yours? are you really quite easy?”

She reflected for a moment and then answered candidly: “No, I don't think I am,

not quite ; but that is your doing. When you talk in this way, I feel a vague uneasiness as if something may be wrong ; but I think it is an unreasonable uneasiness—a sort of nervousness—because I don't believe in impostors and swindlers really taking people in, in real life ; that is for novels and romances.”

“ And you never heard of an actual *bonâ-fide* adventurer hunting down a pretty heiress ?”

“ *Is* Mr. Percival like an adventurer ?”

“ You think that *I* am the unreasonable person, and that your confidence is reasonable ; now to me it appears that there is no reason in your confidence—that it is founded only on your having taken a fancy to the man.”

“ If you argue the point much longer, Mr. Underwood, you will feel disappointed when you find that Mr. Percival is a man of honour and means.”

The Vicar was not a touchy or a self-opiniated man ; he therefore neither felt nor showed the least annoyance at this remark, but took it with a frank good-humour, which

made Miss Bell feel a little vexed with herself for having made it.

“If I write to him to-night and leave the letter with you, will you give it to him?”

“Oh yes,” she said, more amiably than she had spoken before during the conversation. “Of course I know you will do what is right and kind, and it will be only for my dear Freda’s advantage.”

“Thank you,” replied the Vicar meekly, and that was all he said.

Perhaps Corabel, though she had been anxious not to appear too kind, so as to lead to a possibility of the renewal of the morning’s suit, experienced a little chill, that resembled a feeling of disappointment, when, now that she *had* spoken warmly, his only answer had been “thank you,” and that uttered in a meek manner.

That evening, in his own room, Mr. Underwood wrote his letter to Mr. Percival. It ran thus :

“DEAR SIR,

“As a clergyman and an old friend of Mrs. Fane’s, she has empowered me to address

you as her brother or guardian would do if she had one" (he had been going to say, "and as an old friend of her husband's," but the Vicar was the truest of men, and he bethought him that Freda was *not* influenced by that consideration, so instead of it he said), "and I am the more willing to do this as her husband was one of my dearest friends. You will therefore excuse me for writing to you to say that it would be satisfactory to those who care for the young lady to whom you have offered marriage, to know a little about yourself and your position in life before the engagement is ratified. I write with her consent, which makes my doing so a necessity, not an impertinence, and I feel sure that you will take it as such" (here he reflected whether he should also give and ask for the address of lawyers with a view to settlements, but he thought it was too early in the matter for it to be in good taste to do this, and indeed that on the reply to this letter depended the fact whether lawyers and settlements would have to be brought into play at all). "I am obliged to leave S—— to-morrow, and shall not therefore have the pleasure of seeing

you again, but my address will be—" and here followed his address, and then he signed his name.

"There," he thought, "now I have done all that I can do, and of what use is it? what difference will it make? It will make one difference, certainly, which is, that I shall know I have done all that I can do—but beyond that? If the man is nobody, and as poor as possible, will it change Freda—will she marry him the less? And will she believe a word against him? or will Corabel even, who is not in love, and who is a sensible woman? What a habit I am getting into of even thinking of Anna as Corabel. In fact I ought, considering the terms which she chooses us to be on, to think of her as neither, but simply as Miss Bell. Miss Bell, that is what she must now always be to me, till she becomes Mrs. Something or other, and marries a man who had not the misfortune of being refused by her father, and beloved by herself."

The next day the four friends parted. Freda was very good, quiet, and affectionate

at the last. She told Maud to be sure to let her know when they were to come to her for the wedding, but Maud suggested that perhaps Freda would be married first. On this Freda very seriously explained to her that there was no chance of that, and that in fact she was not in any hurry to be married at all; that she had told Mr. Percival so, and meant the engagement to be a very long one; that being engaged was quite nice enough, and as long as one was satisfied with that, there was no occasion to be married.

Maud laughed a little at this, and said :

“ Yes, dear Freda, but it requires two to be satisfied, not one.”

Freda tossed her head, and Maud sagely added : “ Men are very impatient.”

The Vicar partly heard what was passing between the two ladies, and hastened to remark that he thought long engagements were the most sensible things imaginable, where acquaintanceship was short. Then he gave his letter to Corabel. He took a kind, grave leave of that lady, and turning back for a moment to speak to her on the steps of the house, while Freda was exchanging last

words and kisses with Maud, already seated in the cab, he said :

“ I don't suppose I shall ever change my mind. If you do, perhaps you might let me know.”

“ About Mr. Percival ?” cried Corabel.

“ No, Anna, about yourself ; a word, a sign will be enough. I think I could guess it from your handwriting.”

“ Oh, Lewes !” cried Maud from the cab, rendering any answer from Miss Bell impossible, even if she had been capable of giving an answer—“ Oh ! Lewes, isn't it odd ?”

“ Isn't what odd ?”

“ Why, Freda does not know Mr. Percival's Christian name.”

Mr. Underwood murmured something about that being just what he should have expected ; and Freda cried out, unabashed :

“ Why should I know his Christian name ? Very likely he has none at all ; and if he hasn't I don't mind.”

Mr. Underwood was obliged to jump into the cab without improving the occasion, or he would have lost the train.

When he and Maud arrived at the station,

they found the usual bustle going on that attends the departure of a train. Among other passengers, a young man was taking a ticket just before the Vicar's turn came, and the ticket-clerk, civilly and rather anxiously, asked him if his patients in the Crescent were better.

He shrugged his shoulders, and raised his eyebrows a little.

"What can I say?" he answered, with an assumption of lightness that did not sit very naturally on him. "How can fever patients be better till the fever has run its course? They must be worse before they are better, but they are going on well, so far."

"Three cases, are there not?" asked the clerk, who was looking for change.

"Three yesterday, but five this morning."

The clerk gave a low whistle and presented the change, at the same moment muttering, while the doctor passed on, and Lewes Underwood took his place:

"It's a bad look-out when fever gets into the upper class."

"Is there a fever in S——?" asked the Vicar, surprised.

“One that will empty the place one way or another,” replied the clerk shortly.

And then Mr. Underwood, having deposited his money, and received a couple of little bits of cardboard in exchange, also had to pass on.

“I am glad we are going then,” said Maud, who was afraid of infection. “Oh! I hope Freda and Corabel will not stay.”

They took their places in a first-class carriage, and found the young doctor was established there already.

“I had not heard of this fever,” said the Vicar, at once addressing him.

“No; they always keep these things close, for fear of frightening away the visitors, and spoiling the season; but there has been a good deal, here and there, among the poor people, for the last two or three weeks.”

“And now it has appeared among the gentry?”

“Now it has appeared among the gentry, but only in the Crescent as yet. There were three cases at No. 9 on Monday, and two children sickened at No. 12 this morning. This is all, so far, but I am free to confess that I think it will spread.”

“ Is it very infectious ?”

“ It is—and of a low type.”

A servant in livery was just at the moment seen bustling along the platform, and looking into every carriage, as if for some one ; he was turning away disappointed, when he caught sight of the doctor, who was seated at the far window of the last carriage in the train. He came to a standstill, and touched his hat.

“ I’m thankful I’ve found you, sir,” said he. “ My master sent me first to your house, and then on here. I hope you can come. My mistress is very ill, and so is Master Alfred, and we think they’ve got the fever.”

“ There !” cried the doctor ; “ small chance a medical man ever has of getting away for a day. I think you come from Colonel Jackson’s, No. 20 in the Crescent.”

“ Yes, sir ; that’s our place, and the Crescent is full of fever.”

“ It is badly drained, to begin with,” said the doctor, “ and so, when a case occurs, it spreads like wildfire. It will be a fine time for the railway if this becomes a regular epidemic.”

While he spoke he was collecting his wraps and baggage, and with a civil bow to his companions, and a congratulation that they were going, not coming, jumped out of the carriage, and walked quickly away.

He was only just in time; the next minute the whistle sounded, and the train rushed off.

Maud looked with consternation into her brother's face.

"What is to be done?" she cried. "They must come away. We must write and tell them; they may hear nothing about it there."

"Yes, certainly, we must write. The best plan will be for you to write to Anna—to Miss Bell—and then she will decide what is best to be done before Freda hears of it at all."

"Oh! I do hope they will leave directly."

"You must conquer your fear of infection, Maud, when you are a doctor's wife; it was inconvenient enough when you were only a parson's sister."

Maud gave a pleased smile at the words, "when you are a doctor's wife."

“One comfort is,” continued the Vicar, “that the Crescent and the Terrace are so far apart, quite at the two ends of the place, and if bad drainage is the cause, very likely it won’t spread a yard from the Crescent itself. I have known a fever confined to a single row of houses, or to the side of a street, and rage there in the most frightful manner, without being heard of in any other part of a town.”

“And then there are disinfectants,” said Maud, “which there never used to be ; I will write and ask Arthur what the best disinfectants are. There is so much that there was not, ten years ago, when he entered the profession,” she added, with an air of serene satisfaction, as if in some way she attributed the improvements to his presence, if she could not actually connect them with his genius.

The journey proceeded quietly enough, and they reached the junction, where a good many changes took place ; their train was shunted on to another line, from which they watched the arrival of a train which put out all its passengers, to wait to be taken on to S——. Maud amused herself by watching

the different personages who got out and walked up and down, naturally enough deciding to herself which among them were married, which were engaged to be married, and which were in the unhappy position of being neither the one nor the other. She was quite startled to observe that Mr. Percival was among them, but why she should be startled it would be hard to say, as she was aware that he intended to return to S—— that day. She pointed him out to her brother, and catching his eye as she thought, bowed and smiled; but he did not perceive her, and took no notice. She continued to watch all the bustle going on, when the S—— train came up, and, as Mr. Percival was the only person she knew among the crowd, she, without being conscious of it, noted all his movements more than those of any of the others; then the bell rang, and there was a great rush of the passengers to take their places, and of porters loaded with luggage that they flung wildly into the van. One of these men, or rather a long portman-teau he carried over his shoulder, came in contact with Mr. Percival's head, but the

minute afterwards Maud's train received its notice to quit, and steamed rapidly away; in that moment, however, she had seen something that blanched her face, and made her turn it so pale and horrified to her brother that he called hastily out :

“ My dear, you are ill—what is the matter?” while his heart sank with the thought of the fever.

“ Oh, Lewes !” she cried, “ that portmantau ! It knocked Mr. Percival's hat off, and he wears a wig !”

Lewes looked confounded too, but recovered himself almost directly.

“ Well, you know, men do wear wigs ; he may have had his head shaved, or he may be prematurely bald, and suffer from neuralgia ; a wig is a sovereign remedy for that.”

“ Yes,” she cried faintly, and paler than ever ; “ if it were only a wig—but all that red beard is false too—it is indeed, Lewes ! The whole thing slipped a little bit on one side, and showed a black whisker, and then he put it straight again.”

Lewes and Maud stared at each other, and then Lewes contrived to say :

“ I do think that your eyes must have deceived you, Maud.”

But Maud only shook her head, and persisted in her story.

It was very provoking of Lewes to say that, only it is what men do always say to women when women have seen things which they have not ; and besides which, he did not know what else to say.



CHAPTER VIII.

MR. PERCIVAL RETURNS.

THE day passed in rather a slow manner to Freda and Corabel when their friends had taken their departure. A good fit of crying soon after breakfast is not conducive to good spirits during the remainder of the twenty-four hours, and one at least of the girls had indulged in this relief to overtaxed spirits. Corabel, after standing at the house-door till the cab which contained the Vicar and his sister was out of sight, had then paused at the staircase window, which she knew would afford her a last sight of that vehicle, suddenly endowed with a fictitious interest not

its own, as it appeared beyond some houses on the inland road which led to the station, and then only too quickly disappeared again behind another row of houses, to be seen no more; after which she had run hastily up into her own room, had locked the door, flung herself on the bed, and, to her own astonishment, given way to an agony of tears.

“It is all over—all over—all over!” she cried, bewailing her hard fate. “And I might have been his wife; and he is so kind and so good, he would have loved me—me—only me, if I had consented. I might have been, and I would not! It was my own hand, my own words, that have condemned me to a lonely, miserable life, when paradise was open to me, and an angel inviting me to enter. Was I right? Was I wrong? Did I really act for his sake, or was it only pride—horrible, wicked, unwomanly, unchristian pride—that led me on to my own destruction? Did I intend to yield before he went if opportunity offered, or did I really mean to be left like this?”

She sprang from her bed and walked in great agitation about the room, asking her-

self these and a hundred other questions, none of which, of course, she was able to answer. By-and-by she calmed down, and almost smiled to think how unlike Anna, how unlike Corabel, had been the undisciplined emotions of the last half hour. She had acted as she believed to be right. She did not think that pride or pique had had much to do with her decision, which she truly felt had been based on better foundations than these. She had thought most of him, and something of herself. She would not allow him to act from generosity, compassion, or the influence of old memories suddenly revived, and she would not allow herself to accept a heart that might not be wholly hers, or to lead the miserable life of a woman who was only second best in the eyes of her husband.

The more calmly she thought, the more she felt convinced that she had acted rightly; and she also knew that a little hope was creeping into her heart, that all might not be over, and that perhaps the day might come—nay, even now might not be far distant—when the warmth and reality of his love might con-

vince her that in her hands lay the one gift that is, to a woman, as her birthright—that of being the whole world to one man, and making him happy.

But still these thoughts, and the tears that accompanied them, did not make Corabel the most cheerful or lively of companions when she met Freda at luncheon.

Freda had spent, if not an agitated, rather a depressing morning. Missing the friends that were gone, and still so young as to feel the hours that intervened between the present moment and her lover's return as an eternity, when she and Corabel had discussed their sole fritters and chicken croquettes in almost complete silence, interrupted only by a few inane remarks, she yawned visibly, stretched her pretty arms, and said :

“Oh, Corabel, is not it dull? Is not it horribly dull? How strange it seems that such a little time ago you and I were quite contented to be together, and now it is intolerable! Is it not unjust to ourselves that things should change so, and we not able to help it?”

Corabel laughed a little at that.

“Unjust to you that you have fallen in love, dear?” she asked slyly.

“Is that it, do you think? Is that the reason?” said Freda, rather doubtfully. “Well, that would account for it, to be sure. I suppose I shall feel better when he comes; but I *was* so contented with only you, Corabel. What shall I do if it is the same by-and-by, and after the first visitors have come and gone I find I can’t bear being alone with *him*? Oh! what should I do then, Corabel?”

“I don’t think you will find that if you care for him enough, Freda; but that is the meaning of ‘marry in haste and repent at leisure.’ Of course the thing has happened over and over and over again. People have married in haste and repented at leisure, and that is why it is impossible to be too careful before the step is taken, and why girls are so hedged in, and parents and guardians are so anxious as to who they form intimacies with.”

“Bravo! encore!” cried Freda, clapping her hands, delighted at any method of dispersing her *ennui*. “The parson has been

coaching you, Corabel, and you'll get a double first, without the slightest difficulty."

Corabel blushed at that, but answered stoutly :

"It is all true, dear Freda—it is, every word of it, true—and I am only saying just what I think."

"May your shadow never be less, and may you never say more!" and Freda, as she spoke, made her a profound salaam.

Luncheon being finished, Freda demanded rather fretfully if there was anything in the world they could do.

"It is not possible that I am such a contemptible ninny!" she cried, and looked at Corabel with bright, indignant eyes.

"What *do* you mean?"

"It *can't* be that I'm all nohow because a man has gone away for a few hours."

"I think it can very easily be, dear, when that man is your lover."

"Oh, Corabel, I must be in love—that is it. Now I understand. Do you really, really think that I'm in love?"

"My dear Freda, how can you be so silly?"

Why did you accept Mr. Percival unless you were in love with him ?”

Freda looked unaffectedly amazed and bewildered.

“ I am beginning to see,” she said, “ but I only accepted him because he asked me, and I liked it. However, I suppose that was what made the difference between him and all the others ; it was *because* I am in love with him that I liked it ?”

She looked inquiringly at Corabel, and spoke slowly, as if both wanting confirmation of what she said, and requiring time to get accustomed to such a new and strange idea. Corabel could not help laughing.

“ That is a fact hardly to be doubted, I think, Freda.”

“ Well, it’s odd,” was her reply, “ that I never should have thought of it before.”

“ Very odd indeed, my dear.”

“ I suppose it will last, Corabel ?”

If Miss Bell felt inclined to answer this question lightly, she checked herself, and changing her manner, said : “ It will if it is true and real, and founded on anything that affection ought to be founded on ; but not if

it is a mere fancy, or a love without esteem and respect."

She spoke earnestly, and her eyes, full of feeling, showed how much she was in earnest; but Freda shook her head, and cried: "Esteem and respect! oh, that won't pay, Corabel; it won't indeed."

"I think Mr. Percival is the last man I ever met likely to approve of ladies talking slang," replied Miss Bell loftily.

"Now *my* idea of love—*man's* love," cried Freda, and it was the turn of her eyes to sparkle and shine now, "is to approve of everything the woman he loves, does; and if he did not like it before, to like it for her sake."

"That is a boy's love, not a man's."

"Oh, how can you say so! it is *Love*. And it does not matter about age. It is the thing we are talking of, not the age of the person."

"But the age of the person has something to do with the thing, I suspect; and certainly the character of the person has, Freda. And I don't think Mr. Percival will give up his own opinion or judgment because he marries a wife. He may love a woman in spite of

what she does, but he will not approve of a thing because she does it."

"Very well, with all my heart; and the dear fellow may approve or disapprove of me, just as he chooses, as long as he lets me do what I like."

"Ah, as long—yes—and how long will that be, I wonder? Freda, do you really not see that Mr. Percival has a will of his own, and will manage his own household?"

"I declare, if that is the case, I might as well have married a clergyman. But I'll tell you what, Corabel," a sudden thought striking her, "if I *had* married that parson of yours, I should have had my own way in everything. He would have talked and advised, and preached, bless him! and I should have acted. I could have twisted him round my little finger."

"It is a pity you did not marry him then," replied Corabel dryly, "for I don't believe any woman could twist Mr. Percival round her little finger."

"I wonder why one likes one man and doesn't like another," said Freda pensively; "I can't think; can you, Corabel?"

“ I tell you what I do think, Freda, and that is, that you missed one great chance of great happiness in your first marriage, and that I am terribly afraid you may miss another in your second. Mr. Fane was a good man, who loved you passionately, and so is Mr. Percival ; and I do believe, from what I have heard of the one and seen of the other, they had the same sort of tempers and dispositions, and——”

But by this time Freda had got quite pale, and she held up both her little hands to stop her friend's mouth. “ Oh, hush ! oh, don't ! ” she cried, and there were tears in her voice ; “ they are not—there is no resemblance ; quite the contrary. They are utterly unlike ; they are as different in disposition as in person—you know they are. Oh, Corabel, how could you ? ”

“ My dearest Freda, I only speak for your good.”

“ I have a great mind not to marry at all,” replied Freda very solemnly.

“ That you must settle with Mr. Percival,” answered Corabel, laughing ; “ but if you do marry, I strongly advise you to make up

your mind to yield your own will to your husband's sometimes, at least if that husband is Mr. Percival."

"I never make up my mind—I let things come," said Freda. "But I don't believe it *could* happen twice—I *couldn't* have two such husbands, so you may talk on as much as you like, Corabel. I don't mind one bit; you frightened me just for a minute, but it *couldn't* happen twice."

Freda seemed quite contented with this solution of her difficulties, and Corabel did not trouble her with any more advice or prognostications. She asked herself where was the use of it, and told herself that she might just as well talk to a child as to Freda, or a great deal better, in fact, as children can be made to attend to what you say to them, and to do as they are bid; but where was the influence that would produce any effect upon Freda? Perhaps the influence had been found. Perhaps it did really lie in a true affection, and in married life; but if so, neither Freda herself, nor her friends, were as yet conscious that it was so.

Mr. Percival did not keep them waiting

for dinner. The two girls sat one at each end of the table, and he had the guest-seat at the side. Freda looked radiant; she wore white muslin with black ribands, and might almost have passed for a lovely child. Her eyes shone like stars, and her cheeks bloomed like roses. She was all smiles and animation. Corabel thought she had never seen her appear to greater advantage, and did not wonder when she saw that Mr. Percival seemed unable to take his eyes from her enchanting face. She sighed softly as she watched the lovers, and knew what a world of happiness lay before them—a happiness which something seemed to tell her would never in any degree be hers—a happiness that perhaps Freda would fling away, would mar, would destroy; and then—who knows?—when too late, regret. It is a terrible thought that a shadow attends every great happiness, threatening a sorrow as intense as the happiness itself.

When the girls left the dining-room Mr. Percival begged for permission to follow them almost directly, which Freda at first flatly refused, and then laughingly allowed.

“I should have taken it if you had not granted it,” he said, laughing too.

Freda looked significantly at Corabel, and said to her: “Is that the sort of thing you mean?”

Miss Bell, slightly abashed, hurried her friend from the room; then turned back for a moment, as Freda was running upstairs, and lightly laid a letter by Mr. Percival’s side on the table.

“Mr. Underwood asked me to give it you,” she said, with appealing eyes. “He is the only friend of that sort—like a guardian—that she has in the world.”

To Corabel’s surprise he answered with the greatest warmth: “She could not have a better.”

“Lewes is unjust to him,” was Miss Bell’s thoughts, as she followed Freda upstairs. “I would stake my life on his honesty.”

Corabel was not in the habit of taking up hasty impressions either for or against people; her judgment could be trusted, and she seldom liked or disliked without a reason.

She found Freda standing in the open window gazing on the sea, lighted up by the

glory of the setting sun. When she came and stood by her she was surprised at her continuing silent, for silence was not one of Freda's virtues. But as she looked at her, her surprise deepened, for she was pale—she who had been so blooming a moment before, and tears were on her cheeks.

“Oh, Freda!” she cried, “you are unhappy!” and she kissed her. She could not bear—no one ever could—to see Freda unhappy.

But the girl shook her head gently, and smiled through her tears.

“No,” she said very softly, “I am happy! Was I ever happy before, I wonder?”

Then Corabel kissed her again.

“I think, dear,” she said tenderly, “that your happiness is in your own hands; be good, and so you will be happy.”

“And his happiness?” whispered Freda.

“Yes—his happiness is in your hands, too,” cried Corabel with energy; “be good for his sake.”

Then Freda burst out into one of her sweet, childish fits of laughter, and clapped her hands.

“ Oh, Corabel ! Oh, Corabel ! ” she cried ; “ he has bewitched you ! You know nothing of him—nothing, and you know me. And you trust him implicitly, and are sure all will be well if I am only good. Oh, Corabel ! Oh, Corabel ! And you are the wise one of us two ! ”

And so Freda pointed at her with her little finger, and again laughed aloud.

Corabel did not laugh. She reflected, rather uneasily, wondering whether indeed Freda’s words had truth in them, and that she was acting blindly and imprudently, and in no way securing her friend’s real happiness. She could not but recall all Lewes Underwood’s cautions and doubts, and they suddenly appealed to her in altogether a new manner and with a new meaning. Was it possible that she had been influenced herself by pique at the extreme interest he took in the matter, and his extreme repugnance to the marriage ; and had she believed that his views were unconsciously coloured by a more personal feeling ? Was all he had said true and wise ? and all she had said indiscreet, and not wise ? A flood of penitence came over

her as she longed to apologise to him, and tell him she would follow his advice ; and the penitence deepened with the bitter feeling that she might never more hear advice from his lips, or have the opportunity of rejecting or accepting it. Ah, how cold-hearted, self-opiniated, and ungrateful she had been ! and so, only so, he could now think of her. What would she not give to recall the past week, the past day even !

Then she turned with yearning regret to the calm, if pensive, existence of the last two years, when Lewes Underwood had died out of her life, if not out of her memory ; had been prized there as one who might have died in reality, so completely was he dead to her. Corabel longed to be calm, if pensive, again, and hated herself for feeling keenly, and wishing ardently, when feelings and wishes were in vain.

Mr. Percival joined them as quickly as he had threatened to do, and Freda welcomed him with such smiles as would have repaid a lover had they greeted him on his return from a war where he had left an arm or a leg behind him.

His first look and smile, however, were not for her, but for Corabel. They were quick, significant, and genial, and he touched his waistcoat-pocket, from which one end of Mr. Underwood's note peeped out, as he gave her this very satisfactory and meaning salutation. Again Corabel's faith in him revived, and again she felt a conviction that in doubting him, the Vicar was wrong. Still she did not blame Lewes. His doubts of this man might be mistaken, but his conduct was only right and kind. As Freda's friend, he was bound to make inquiries into Mr. Percival's character and position, however unimpeachable both might be. She therefore came to the pleasant conviction that while the one man was all that he should be, the other was justified in asking him if he was so.

By-and-by Freda went to the piano to sing, and then Mr. Percival, as she struck the first chords on the instrument, turned to Corabel and said in a low voice, with a smile that seemed to her so sweet, she wished it had not been enveloped in hair :

“ He is an excellent fellow, and I shall be able to satisfy him in all respects.”

“ I never doubted it, and I am sure he did not either,” she replied warmly; and then it suddenly occurred to her that in the last words she had told one of those falsehoods, or rather her lips had told for her one of those falsehoods, that I believe all our lips tell for all of us sometimes, when we do not the least intend that they should do so. The words were uttered on impulse, and it was only after they were uttered that she saw they were untrue. It was too late then to recall them; but Mr. Percival’s answer embarrassed her.

“ Does he like me ?” he said quickly.

What could she say in reply ? She looked up and she looked down, and she looked at him quite pitifully, as one who would say : “ Don’t ask me.” And then she said nothing, and felt that silence was almost worse than speaking the truth ; but she was relieved by Mr. Percival laughing a little low laugh, as if more to himself than to her, and saying, before she had found any words to speak :

“ Never mind ; he will by-and by.”

After that they found that Freda was

singing, and that they must hold their
tongues and listen.

“ I love the little cloud
Floating in summer sky—
If you ask the reason,
I cannot tell you why !

“ I love the silver spray
Gleaming where streams dart by—
If you ask the reason,
I cannot tell you why !

“ I love the murmuring
Of grasses where they lie—
If you ask the reason,
I cannot tell you why !

“ I love the rosy light
Left where the sunsets die—
If you ask the reason,
I cannot tell you why !

“ I love the rushing sound
Of eagles as they fly—
If you ask the reason,
I cannot tell you why !

“ I love the wistful glance
Hid in a baby's eye—
If you ask the reason,
I cannot tell you why !

“ Why do I love at all?
I who but live to die—
If I ask the reason,
Oh, who can tell me why?”

Freda sang this song with none of the varying expression which was intended to be thrown into each verse, and which ought to have given them their charm; the music when so accompanied bringing vividly before the mind the murmuring sound that the wind makes when wandering among grasses; the solemn rush of the eagle's wings as it flies over its native mountains; and even the sight of the silver spray; the idea of the floating cloud, and rosy light; and the exquisite reality of a baby's eyes. All this the music contained, ending in a wail like that sent forth by an *Æolian* harp, over the uselessness of loving at all. None of this expression did Freda give; she sang the song straight through, with her clear, childlike voice; but it had as ever that pathetic ring in it, which brought tears to the listeners' eyes, without any trouble taken on the part of the singer. Like everything else about Freda, she could not help her singing being charming.

“You never heard that song before,” she said to Mr. Percival. “Do you like it?”

“I have heard it before,” he answered, “and I like it very much. I have not heard it for years.”

“You never heard it at all,” she retorted. “You could not. It was written by a friend of my aunt’s; she gave it to her, and never to any one else. It is not published. You can’t have heard it.”

“You aunt *must* have given it to some one, or some one must have picked it up from hearing it, for I know it quite well. Why do you omit the verse—

“I love the tender dreams
Of happiness gone by—
If you ask the reason,
I cannot tell you why’?”

“Why, you really do know it!” cried Freda, as if quite astonished to find he was speaking the truth. “How very, very odd! Now you must tell us who you have heard sing it; you must indeed. There cannot be more than one person who picked it up in that way, and as you remember the words so well,

you must remember the person who sang them ; you must have heard it often."

"I used once to hear it often, and I remember the person who sang it perfectly."

"Who was it? Make haste! don't you see I am in a hurry?"

There was a moment's pause, and then Mr. Percival answered her quietly :

"It was my wife."

Freda gave a low musical scream.

Corabel rose from her chair and cried out :
"Your wife!"

"Oh yes! don't you know he has been married? I wish he hadn't, but he has. However, she wasn't nice, and he was as unhappy as possible, which is a great comfort."

"Oh, Freda, don't!" said Corabel, shocked, and glancing timidly at Mr. Percival, who somehow did not seem to mind Freda's revelations.

"He has a better temper than I gave him credit for," thought Corabel, "unless it is only that he is so very much in love."

"But I'll never sing the song again if *she* sang it," cried Freda vindictively. "She

ought not to have sung it. She had no business to have it at all—just like her!”

“Oh, Freda, don’t — pray don’t!” said Corabel.

“You do not spare me, Mrs. Fane,” said Mr. Percival; but it seemed to Corabel that if he meant to express displeasure he did not really feel it. “Shall I speak of your late husband in the same way?”

All this offended Miss Bell’s taste extremely, and was as unlike as possible anything she would have expected from Mr. Percival, who being a very reserved man, she had accredited with that amount of deep and sensitive feeling which reserved men generally possess, and which those who are in reality only dull, sometimes are given credit for. Mr. Percival certainly was not dull; how then could his present behaviour be accounted for, and what would the Vicar think of it if he were here? Ah, the Vicar! imagine him speaking in this manner to Freda of her husband, or so composedly making such an allusion to his wife, if he had ever had one, which, thank goodness! he never had. And so Mr. Percival was a

widower. Well, here was one revelation about him, and at any rate he had practised no concealment on this head to Freda ; he had told her all about his first marriage, evidently.

While these far from comfortable thoughts were passing through Corabel's mind, Freda had answered her lover.

"Oh no!" she cried; "you shall not speak of him at all. It makes me miserable. I *can't* bear it. I want never, never to think of him again; and sometimes I *have* forgotten him and am quite unmarried, but to speak of him recalls it all."

And she held up both hands with that pretty movement that Freda's friends knew so well.

Mr. Percival seemed to mind these remarks far more than he had done the uncomplimentary allusions to the late Mrs. Percival; his thick brows were knit together in a portentous frown, and he looked gloomily down on the ground.

"Poor fellow!" he said; "how you do hate his very memory!"

Then Freda rose from the music-stool

and stood before him with a pale radiant face.

“It is not only that,” she cried, “but I think I was partly wrong. Oh! I was—I was—and he is *dead!*”

Mr. Percival caught both her hands in his, and seemed as if he could have caught herself to his heart, but checked himself because Corabel was there also. He looked at her very lovingly. Freda got paler and paler.

“I am glad he is dead, you know,” she said softly; “of course I am glad he is dead; but I wish I had been a better girl—I really do—and he was so wicked. Oh, I do so hope he is annihilated. Some people think they are, you know,” she continued appealingly; “those that are not good enough for heaven. And *I* think it would be so *much* the best plan, and such a comfort to the people in heaven—don’t you?”

“Oh, Freda! he was not wicked,” cried Corabel. “He was a very good man, only his temper was bad, and you did not understand one another, that was all;” she turned in an explanatory manner to Mr. Percival as she said this.

Freda smiled, and replied : “ I am sure I don't know about that.”

She was getting paler and paler before their eyes, and all of a sudden she staggered and would have fallen if Mr. Percival had not caught her in his arms. He might dare to hold her now notwithstanding Corabel's presence, and she lay still and motionless, with closed eyes and lily-white face. He looked at her with a sort of wild terror, and then almost angrily at Corabel, as if it was her fault.

“ She has fainted,” said Corabel, alarmed ; for to see any one faint is a terrible thing, even if we know well that this pretence of death will in a few moments pass away. “ She has fainted. Place her on the sofa. No one ever will believe that she is not strong—but she isn't.”

Corabel also had an almost angry manner. When frightened or anxious, it is a great relief to most people to be angry with somebody or other.

Freda was most tenderly placed on the couch, a little water from a neighbouring flower vase lightly sprinkled on her forehead,

and strong salts held to her nose. She gave a very small panting sigh, and then opened her eyes. But she was some minutes before she recovered herself, or any colour came back into her cheeks and lips.

She looked wonderingly at Mr. Percival and Corabel.

“Why am I here? was not I singing—

“‘But if you ask the reason,
I cannot tell you why?’”

“I can tell you,” replied Miss Bell. “You have been a little faint, that is all.”

“Are you better, my love?” asked he with a soft tenderness in voice and face which touched Corabel, and brought a happy security in her friend’s future happiness to her heart.

“I am not ill, am I?” replied Freda, smiling up at him, while the light in his eyes seemed to shine reflected from hers. “Why do you look at me so——” she paused as if wanting some name to call him by; and then added, “Oh, tell me your Christian name! I can’t call a man Mr. who looks at me so, and when I’m fainting.”

There was a profound silence.

Corabel's anxious glance sought his face as if she thought the revelation of this unknown Christian name would do much towards clearing up the mystery about him, if there was a mystery ; and to her surprise she saw his colouring gradually deepen, and a variety of emotions flit over his countenance.

At last he spoke.

"It is the same," he said. "It is Percival."

"Percival Percival — how nice !" cried Freda ; "so much better than Hughes Hughes or Lloyd Lloyd ; and I shall call you Percy. Do you know, I was dreadfully afraid it might be something shabby, and that was why you didn't tell. John, you know, or even Samuel."

"That would have been too terrible," he said, smiling at her as if she were a fanciful child. "No ; I have no reason to be ashamed of my name."

"I should think not," cried Freda proudly. "Percival Percival !"

"And now," said Corabel sensibly, "I am sure Freda ought not to talk. Will you let

me send you away, Mr. Percival? A fainting fit is not recovered from in a minute, and Freda is not at all strong."

"I am as strong as a mountain pony."

"You are more like a little Arab, which is proverbially delicate and fragile, my dear," answered her friend fondly.

"Whatever you are," said her lover, "Miss Bell is right, and rest is what you want just now; and I will go away, and you shall have it. I did not know you were delicate, Freda,"

"I am not a bit delicate; I never was. It is only ~~that~~ young lady's nonsense. She thinks she will have more power over me if she dubs me an invalid."

"She had a fever in Jamaica; she was never very ill, but she couldn't get well; and that is why she was sent home, and she has not been strong since. She will require a great deal of care for two or three years—a very great deal of care, Mr. Percival—and then she will be a strong woman; but she will never be a strong woman without the care."

"Hear her!" cried Freda, astonished, and sitting upright on the sofa in her surprise.

“Why she has got theories, I declare. She talks like a very foolish book.”

“It will be my dearest privilege to take all possible care of her, and the sooner she gives me the power to do so the better for us both,” said Mr. Percival. “And now I will prove how fit I am to be trusted with her, by tearing myself away from her; I need hardly say how unwillingly.”

With these words he took his leave; Corabel having the charity to retreat into the window while the lovers parted.



CHAPTER IX.

NOTHING NEW.

FREDA slept soundly, and declared that she was quite well the next morning; but Corabel talked of doctors, and threatened her with one if she did not take great care of herself. She alluded also to extract of malt and cod-liver oil, and advised Freda to be very discreet, or there was no saying what would happen to her; but Freda only laughed gaily, and looked healthy enough, if roses and lilies are signs of health—although about Freda's roses and lilies there was an exquisite refinement and fragile beauty, which often sent a feeling of anxiety like a sharp pang through

Corabel's heart, for Corabel loved Freda very dearly.

Mr. Percival called to inquire soon after breakfast, before which visit Freda had told Miss Bell that she meant to see Benjamin that day.

He looked a little grave when he heard her intentions referred to.

"I don't know what to say about it," he remarked ; "there is a good deal of illness in the town."

"You don't know what to say about it!" cried Freda, her lovely eyes opening wide with astonishment.

"No," he replied calmly ; "there is fever in the town, and I think it would be best to inquire if the part in which the boy lives is infected."

"Inquire by all means if you like," said Freda, as calmly as he had spoken, but with a calmness neither he nor Corabel felt quite comfortable under.

"And I will let you know before you decide about going."

"Don't trouble yourself. I have quite decided. I intend to go directly after luncheon."

“Yes, by all means, if it is safe.”

“Do you suppose somebody else being ill would prevent my paying Benjamin a visit?” she said with disdain. “*His being* ill makes me go. You are confusing yourself—Percival.” His name was spoken rather lingeringly, after a moment’s pause; and then she turned to Corabel, and said briskly, “I like calling him by that name, because it sounds as if it was his surname, and I was vulgar, while I really am not; and *that* is just what I like.”

“I have been thinking seriously,” said he, taking no more notice of Freda than if she had not spoken, but addressing himself to Miss Bell—“I have been thinking seriously that you ought soon to leave S——. This fever is spreading; there are several cases in the Crescent; and people are moving away in consequence.”

Corabel was afraid of infection.

“Oh, then I really think we ought,” she said, turning hastily to Freda.

“You and Mr. Percival may go, dear, whenever you like; but I cannot.”

“That is nonsense, Freda!”

“No, it is not nonsense—it is serious sense.”

“And why cannot you go?” asked Mr. Percival impatiently.

She took no notice of him, hummed a tune, and looked out of the window.

“What do you mean, Freda, by saying you cannot go?” asked Corabel gently.

“I promised Benjamin to stay as long as he lived,” she replied; “so you see I can’t help myself.”

“But you don’t intend to spend the winter here!” exclaimed Mr. Percival, with some indignation.

“Don’t I!” replied she quietly. “I thought I did.”

“But that is absurd; it is not a place for the winter; you could not possibly do it.”

“Couldn’t I? That is unlucky, for I certainly shall.”

“Why, Freda,” remonstrated Corabel, “you talked of our going abroad!”

“Yes, dear Corabel, but that was before I promised Benjamin; you know it was.”

“Promised Benjamin!” repeated Mr. Percival, with huge disdain.

“Yes, sir,” replied Freda boldly; “promised Benjamin.”

“You promised somebody else something,” said he.

“I never promised any one to leave S——, and I am not going to do it. You can go, and Corabel can go, but I shall stay as long as Benjamin lives. Oh, I wonder whether he will want me to be with him when he dies!” she added, with a little shudder, and turning pale.

Freda had one of those transparent skins that change colour with every emotion of the mind; but Corabel thought the variations had become more than ever of late, and that fact among others sometimes filled her with a vague alarm.

“I suppose,” she said, addressing Mr. Percival, “that there is no real danger at present? There is nothing of an epidemic to alarm? We must have heard of it if there was.”

“By no means; lodging-house-keepers and shop people say as little about such things as possible, and, as a matter of course, keep them from the knowledge of visitors if they can.

I suspect it has been going on for some time among the lower classes, but now it has broken out in the Crescent with a virulence that puts concealment out of the question."

"Well, we are not living in the Crescent. The Crescent! why, it is at the other end of the world!" cried Freda; "and it is as far from where Benjamin lives as one place can be from another anywhere. I hope we are not going to be such cowards as *that!*"

"I hope we are not going to be cowards at all," replied Mr. Percival; "but I hope we are not going to be fools either. I shall make more inquiries, and if it really is as I fear, I hope there will be no difficulties made about leaving S——."

"'Hope told a flattering tale,'"

warbled Freda very sweetly.

"Suppose we talk about it after you have made the inquiries," said Corabel, with her usual wisdom.

He shrugged his shoulders, and said no more; but very soon afterwards took his leave. Freda ran out after him, and called him back into the passage from the stairs—

he was half way down. With a shy and irresistibly pretty gesture she laid her smooth, soft cheek on his shoulder, for one second, and ere she could withdraw it, he had caught her in his arms, and kissed her. She did not make much resistance, but yielded herself to the embrace, almost returning it for a brief moment, and then ran laughing away.

She found Corabel standing very thoughtful, on just the same spot of the carpet where she had left her.

“I think,” said Freda, “I shall be off to Benjamin at once.”

“Will you not wait to hear that it is safe?”

“No; that is just what I wish to avoid. If the plague was raging there, I would go just the same.”

“But that is so foolish, Freda. You are afraid of death, yet you recklessly brave it.”

Then all Freda’s lovely colour, heightened as it had been by the farewell at the head of the stairs, faded away, in that manner Corabel did not like to see, and left her pale, with a frightened look in her eyes.

“Don’t!” she cried; “don’t, you cruel Corabel! I am horribly afraid; but what

difference can it make? Benjamin will cry if I don't go to him. Oh, Corabel! I *can't* make a little sick child—a *poor* child, too—unhappy; and a child that loves me! I must go, you know I must.”

“But why not wait till Mr. Percival returns?”

“Because, if the fever is there, he will want me not to go; and I must go.”

“He will be very much displeased.”

“Oh, Corabel! I don't wish to displease him.” Then she came up almost on tip-toe to her friend, and looked earnestly in her face, with a soft, wistful expression in her eyes. “I love him, Corabel!”

Corabel kissed her. “Yes! and he loves you, child. He loves your little finger better than all of some women are ever loved;” and here she sighed. “Don't risk such a love as that, Freda.”

“No, no; not if I can help it. But Benjamin—I must not forsake Benjamin. If he comes while I am out, try to make him see that, dear Corabel. You are so wise that he will believe you.”

“You are wilful as ever; though you do love

him, you still go your own way and do what you like—not what he likes. I doubt whether that is a love that will content him when he is your husband.”

“Husbands are mistakes,” cried Freda; “there is no doubt at all of that; only men are so stupid, they can’t let well alone and be content. Lovers do just what you tell them, of course; but husbands are mistakes!”

“You had better tell Mr. Percival that.”

“I think I *have* told him, or something like it; though really I don’t know whether it may not end in my liking to do what he likes better than what I like myself. I have got a *souçon* of the idea of the thing coming over me, Corabel, almost as if it might be pleasant; only it must not be Benjamin, you know—anything but Benjamin. *C’est defendu.*”

So Freda put on her hat, and kissing her hand to Corabel, flew gaily away.

Miss Bell looked after her sadly.

“What shall I do without her?” she asked herself. “What shall I do when she is married? and will she—will she be happy?”

When Freda and Mr. Percival met in the afternoon, matters ran smoother than the morning’s conversation had rendered probable.

He had ascertained that there was no illness sufficiently near Benjamin's house to render him really afraid of Freda going there ; and he even hoped that the fever was *not* assuming an epidemic form of an alarming character among the higher classes at S——. The last cases reported from the Crescent were beyond all doubt a false alarm. Two people had been taken ill in the same house, and the conclusion had naturally been arrived at, that it was with the fever that had attacked the inhabitants of other houses ; but it seemed that was not the case. Gout and inflammation of the lungs were the causes of indisposition, and the fever was innocent. Mr. Percival saw no use in a panic, and in people running away in terror of danger that did not exist, so he was quite willing to wait a few days and see what turn affairs took. Freda did not tease him in consequence of the change, and affirm her determination of staying at all risks ; and Corabel only rejoiced in silence over the wisdom of her suggestions, that they should wait till inquiries had been made before they discussed the subject at all.

The trio therefore were content enough,

especially the two of them who went out for a walk and left the third alone. Whether Corabel was at this special time happy or miserable enough in her solitude, I will leave the reader to judge. It is only the very happy and the very miserable for whom solitude has its charms. In the debatable land between the two extremes, it is haunted by spectres that lie in wait, and pounce on their victims as soon as they get a fair opportunity.


In the evening the two girls were going to a party. It was at a private house where Mr. Percival did not visit, and the invitation had been accepted before his engagement had been formed.

“ We will take you,” said Freda airily.

“ Thanks !” replied her lover rather stiffly ;
“ but I am not fond of being taken.”

Then he began to demur at the idea of her going at all. She had fainted last night. She was not at all strong. Might it not be wiser for her to stay quietly at home ?

But Freda shook her lovely head and laughed. No, she had promised to go, and go she must ; and Corabel suggested that perhaps if she did not, it would give offence,



and draw attention to the reason of her staying at home, and gossip about such things was always unpleasant. If they stayed at home, and he dined with them—which would be a matter of course, else why should they stay at home at all?—people would be sure to talk.

Mr. Percival admitted the truth of this at once ; adding that he had reasons why he did not wish the engagement to be known at all in S——.

Corabel could not help laughing.

“If that is the case,” she said, “I really advise you not to take long *tête-à-tête* walks before breakfast on the sands and elsewhere.”

He looked a little ashamed of himself, and owned that was not very wise.

“Then you would rather I did not tell people to-night?” asked Freda demurely, as if otherwise her announcing her engagement would have been a matter of course.

“Did you always say things in that way, I wonder,” he answered rather moodily. “How misunderstood you must often have been !”

“ I like being misunderstood by fools,” she said sweetly.

“ By fools ! well, I suppose there are fools who misunderstand you ; but I can understand you bewildering a man who had taken up quite a different idea about you, and was not accustomed to the ways of women. I think,” he added, speaking slowly, “ I could once have misunderstood you myself.”

“ Yes !” she said ; “ but you see you got experience in an unhappy marriage. I *wish* you hadn’t.”

“ Don’t unwish my first marriage, dear,” he said gently ; “ without it, I believe I never should make you happy, as I hope to do.”

“ Some day you will tell me all about it, Percival,” she said, nestling up towards him.

Corabel had already gone to her room to dress.

“ Yes ! some day I will.”

“ Percival, don’t you think it will be uncommonly nice if Mr. Underwood and Corabel are married ?”

“ Lewes Underwood and your Corabel ?”

“ Yes, she was his before she was mine. They were in love a hundred years ago.”

“ But he wanted to marry you.”

“ Oh, that was only because I was a servant girl that came in between. I think he wants to marry her again, now.”

“ And is she satisfied with that ?”

“ She ought to be, as he wanted to marry her twice, and me only once, you know.”

“ I know few things that I should like better than such a marriage as that,” said Mr. Percival thoughtfully.

“ You liked her before you liked me, Percival. You asked to be introduced to her, and you took no notice of me at all. I thought it such a shame.”

He laughed and fondly stroked her pretty head, that bent towards him.

“ Oh, Percival! did you ever want to marry her ?”

“ No, my darling, never ; I never wanted to marry any one but you.”

“ I did everything I could to attract you that night,” said Freda, with extreme earnestness, “ and it wasn't of the least bit of use.”

His face clouded over a little.

“ You were in the habit of doing every-

thing you could to attract men the first time you saw them, I suppose."

"No," she said confidentially, "I never was. I never cared for men; they all came to me, and I did not mind them, and never liked one of them after the first dance. But I took to you from the beginning, and have never left off taking to you since. Is not that odd, Percival?"

His answer may be imagined, and then he was obliged to go away, and Freda had to run off and dress with unusual rapidity.

Mr. Percival did not enjoy his solitary dinner. He did not return to his own pretty house, but went to the hotel and ordered dinner in the coffee-room. Several parties were dining there, and he caught many portions of desultory conversations from the tables near him. Two ladies and two gentlemen dined at a little table close to his and talked loudly, careless as to whether they were overheard or not.

First of all, they discussed the fever a good deal, and the sanitary state of S——. One of the gentlemen was an alarmist, and thought everybody ought to leave the place directly;

but his companions seemed inclined to agree that a good many people had been frightened, and run away without sufficient cause. The Crescent was in a bad state, there was no doubt of that ; but then the drainage of the Crescent was known to be defective.

“ I saw that beautiful creature visiting her poor people again,” said the other gentleman. “ What a wonder she is !”

“ I think it is a case of a little of a *tête exaltée*,” said one of the ladies, touching her forehead as she spoke. “ It is so unnatural in a mere girl—and really a pretty girl, too,” she added, in a disparaging tone.

“ Pretty !” cried the gentleman. “ Why, she is a miracle of beauty and a miracle of fondness. If *that* is having a *tête exaltée*, I am sure I wish all womankind had *têtes exaltées*, as well as the lovely widow.”

“ You should hear all they say about her at the railway accident,” said the lady who had not spoken before. “ The minute she heard of it—it is her vocation, you know—she set off from S——, and rushed to the scene of action ; and there she was like one inspired—doing just exactly all that every-

body ought to do—setting limbs like doctors and praying like clergymen. Whatever was required she did, so that all the real people were useless.”

“That is not true, at any rate,” said the first lady triumphantly; “for she was in the accident herself, so she couldn’t have rushed off there.”

“Well, she was there, at any rate; and she set a man’s leg, and when Sir William Ferguson saw it he was amazed, and asked whose work it was; it was some new dodge, some new invention in legs that he thought nobody knew but himself, and he only just knew it, and said he could not have done it nearly as well.”

“People say that she ran away from a convent with her husband; that she was a nun, you know, and that that is how she learnt the surgery and nursing; and now she is doing penance, and is obliged to go about to all the accidents in the country,” said the other lady.

“I wonder whether she learned how to flirt and be charming in the convent too?” answered the gentleman. “Why, she is the

life of a dance ; she is a ball-room queen, and the most delightful creature to flirt with possible. I suppose the father confessors teach that sort of thing in the convents, hey ?”

“ I don’t believe she was a nun at all,” said the other gentleman. “ I have heard it said she is a Russian spy.”

“ Only what could a Russian spy do here ?” asked the lady who ran Freda down eagerly, and was evidently quite willing to believe what was said.

But the other gentleman laughed and explained.

“ He is quizzing you, Miss Baring ; no one ever said it but himself, or before this minute. Murphy is one of Mrs. Fane’s warmest admirers. Dear me ! can’t one have a beautiful woman, and as good as she is pretty, come in among us without carping at her ?”

“ I didn’t carp at her,” replied Miss Baring resentfully, “ and it’s not my fault if she is a nun, though I must own I do *not* admire her as much as all of you do ; but there is no crime in that, I suppose.”

“ That’s a good-looking girl who lives with her,” said Mr. Murphy ; “ was she a nun too ?”

“And that clergyman who was with them for a few days was a disguised monk, I suppose?”

“But there’s another thing said about her,” continued Mr. Murphy. “They do say she is an escaped slave from some West Indian island.”

“If the slaves that have not escaped are like her,” replied the other man, “I’ll go to Jamaica to-morrow.”

“I think it’s a great shame to talk about her this way at all, even in joke,” said her lady admirer. “She is a very pretty, nice young widow, and that’s all about it.”

“You don’t believe, then, that she has run away, or been let out of an asylum?” demanded Mr. Murphy—“a sort of ticket-of-leave lunatic, and that the other young woman is her keeper?”

Mr. Percival finished his dinner as quickly as he could, and left the inn, very much disgusted by all the chaffing and chatting he had overheard. He lighted his cigar, and went down to the sands, where he walked rapidly up and down.

“Watering-places are detestable,” he re-

flected angrily to himself. "She has no right to be here. That friend of hers should have known better, and not let her come. Let her! Who could prevent her? Oh to have her safe in my keeping, and to keep her safe! When will it be? How will it be? Am I not the veriest coward not to take matters into my own hands and settle it at once? Yet who would not be a coward where the happiness of two lives is at stake? A man who has been shipwrecked once by his own fault is careful how he steers his ship next time."

It was a fine clear evening; one by one the stars shone out of a cloudless sky, as the light of the day faded away into the more beautiful light of a summer night; the calm, yet active sea made a faint, soft murmuring sound, as it retreated from the sands, that might have served as a lullaby for a soul in pain. There was some pain in Percival's soul that was soothed by it. He took off his hat, and stood bare-headed under the pale blue vault, to which he raised reverent eyes.

"If God will help me!" he said; "if God will help me, we may be happy yet!"

Then he took out his watch and looked at it. It was already ten o'clock. He had charged Freda not to stay late when he had demurred about her going at all; he had reminded her again of her having fainted the previous evening, and told her then, though it might be necessary for her to attend the party, there could be no necessity for her to stay late at it. He thought she would surely be coming away now, and that he would go near the house where they were, and escort them home, or persuade them to linger on the shore a little with him.

With all the impatience of a lover, he turned towards the shore for this purpose. "I shall see her again," he thought, almost surprised at his own impatience; "I shall hear her voice and her laugh. In a few minutes her hand will rest on my arm; we shall be together."

It proved, however, to be a very long few minutes indeed, and Mr. Percival walked about in the neighbourhood of Mrs. Simpson's house till he was tired—tired in spirit, if not tired of walking—and indescribable vexation came over him that Freda should

attend so little to his requests ; should hold them so lightly, and be as far from him in soul as in body. Then suddenly the door of the house burst open, and the sound of gay voices and laughter reached his lonely, discontented ears. People were bidding each other good-bye, and talking eagerly of future meetings. Half a dozen young men and women trooped out on to the steps. There was Freda among them, and she was leaning on a man's arm ; her lovely face was turned eagerly up to his, that bent over her.

Mr. Percival was so near, though hid by the shadow of the houses, that he could actually hear what they said ; yet they by no means spoke as loudly as their companions.

“ To-morrow, then ; you certainly will not fail ?” the man said.

“ Between twelve and one,” said Freda's sweet voice in reply ; “ no other time is sure.”

“ Between twelve and one be it,” answered the stranger.

He raised his hat and shook hands with her, and then, turning, passed close where Mr. Percival stood, and, to his surprise and

disgust, he recognised the young man who had so earnestly stared at Freda as they came up from the shore two days ago, and whose appearance he had thought at the time moved her with some emotion.

He remembered also that he had told Freda he should be engaged between twelve and one o'clock the next day, which recollection did not diminish his displeasure.

As the young people all separated to go their different ways, and Corabel and Freda were proceeding home, attended by a servant who, like him, had been waiting for them, he stepped forward and took his place between them. Freda greeted him with smiles, but was it his fancy made him think they were not as brilliant as usual?

They told him they had had a pleasant evening, but had missed him very much. He asked Freda if he should breakfast with her the next day.

"No," she said, "don't come till after luncheon."

"I will come and take you for a walk before luncheon," he said; "I will come between twelve and one o'clock."

“Why you said you had an engagement then.”

“Yes, but it does not signify ; I will break it to walk with you.”

“But that is rather unlucky,” she said, laughing a little, “for I have an engagement for that hour too.”

“You had no engagement this morning ; may I ask when you made it ?”

“What can that signify ? however, I don’t care ; I made it to-night.”

“Freda, will you tell me what it is ?”

“I don’t like being questioned in this manner.”

“Why should you mind my questioning you, Freda ?” he said gently. “Do you know you would oblige me very much if you would tell me what it is ?”

Freda smiled at him with an innocent frankness that disarmed suspicion.

“I will not tell you now,” she cried, nodding her head ; “I will tell you afterwards.”

They had reached the Terrace, but it was too late for him to go in with them. The sea made its delicious night-song, murmuring

on the shore below. There was no moon, but the summer starlight was divine. The world seemed made for serene hearts and tender prayers, with room neither for sorrow nor keen joy in it: there was not a breath of wind.

Mr. Percival took her hand and pressed it. "I trust you, Freda," he cried, and she smiled in his face.

When he had left them the two girls went up to their room.

"What is this wonderful engagement?" inquired Corabel.

"Don't ask me," she cried; "if I would not tell *him*, do you suppose *you* will hear anything about it?"

"I don't like that Mr. Beverley," said Corabel.

"Oh, don't you? I do."

"I can't think what you were talking about so earnestly."

"I should wonder if you could, dear."

"Freda!" cried Corabel, catching the airy skirt of Freda's dress just as she was disappearing into her room, "when women are engaged they must not flirt."

“How *do* you know that? is it from experience, I wonder? You ought to come to me for lessons, since I may be supposed to know the duties of that state better than you do. Good-night, my dear.”

And Freda shut the door, with gentle laughter, against her friend.

The next day Freda told Corabel that she was going out before luncheon and might be kept some time, so she should eat cakes at the pastry-cook's, and Corabel need not wait luncheon for her; and she had sent a note to Mr. Percival asking him to dinner, and telling him not to come before, as she had visits that must be paid, and letters that must be written, so she thought she should make a day of it.

“The Jamaica mail goes out to-morrow, and I must write to my aunt and tell her that I am engaged. Poor aunt, I am sure she will be glad to hear it.”

Corabel listened languidly to what she said.

“I have a really bad headache,” was all she replied, “so bad that I shall just lie

down in my own room and sleep it off if I can."

Then Freda kissed her, and pitied her, and begged her to take great care of herself.



CHAPTER X.

A CRISIS.

MR. PERCIVAL arrived punctually at a little before seven, but found neither of the young ladies in the drawing-room, nor was there any elegant litter to show that they had recently occupied it.

Corabel was the first to appear. She still wore her morning dress and looked pale, with dark circles round her eyes. He asked at once if she was not well, and she told him she had had a headache all day. Freda had been out, or in her own room writing letters, and they had hardly met. The next minute Freda entered, faultlessly dressed and brilliantly lovely. A deeper colour than usual glowed

in her cheeks, and her eyes shone with a wonderful light. Mr. Percival marvelled as he looked at her whether every day of life was to bring an increase of beauty. At dinner she talked with the utmost vivacity, and hardly allowed either of her companions to put in a word ; but as it happened Corabel did not want to talk, and Mr. Percival was content to listen.

At last Miss Bell asked her whether she had written her Jamaica letter, and thereupon she became suddenly grave, and said she had not written a word of it.

“I did write my letters,” observed Mr. Percival ; “and one of them was the most unpleasant letter, almost, I ever wrote in my life. It was to a friend, and it was to advise him to break off an engagement to marry.”

“What could make you do that?”

“He asked my advice ; the girl had deceived him, and he was doubtful what to do, but I had not any doubt.”

“Had she told him a falsehood?” asked Freda, with a little shiver.

He shook his head.

“She had done worse than that ; she had

acted one ; she had deceived him though she had not lied to him. He asked me what I should do in his place ; I told him I should whistle her to the winds—that the fault was unpardonable.”

As he spoke the word “unpardonable” with a force he knew only too well how to give it, an expression of despair came into Freda’s exquisite face : an expression unperceived at the moment by either of her companions, and gone before they looked at her again.

But she rose from the table almost immediately, the dinner being scarcely over when she did so.

“Oh, Corabel !” she exclaimed, “the room is stifling—stifling ! I cannot bear it—let us go upstairs !”

Corabel did not enter the drawing-room at all ; her head still ached, and she said she would again lie down quietly. “You two will entertain each other very well without me,” she added, laughing ; “I can’t flatter myself that I shall be missed.”

When Freda was left alone she began walking wildly up and down the room, more

like an insane creature than one who was in the possession of her senses. Had those ladies and gentlemen seen her now, who discussed her so freely the day before, they would have inclined to the theory of the ticket-of-leave lunatic rather than to any of the other theories that they had mentioned about her.

“What shall I do? what shall I do?” she cried passionately. “Can I live? can I bear it? what shall I do?”

Mr. Percival never remained long alone in the dining-room, and to-day he followed the two girls sooner even than usual. He hoped Freda intended to explain to him the meaning of the mysterious engagement formed last night, and he was glad when he joined her to find that Corabel was not there.

He put his arm round her and kissed her. She yielded softly to his embrace, and suddenly and unexpectedly returned his kiss. Then she drew with almost violent gesture away from him, and cried out, “That is the last, the very last! You will never, never kiss me again!”

He looked at her in amazement. Was she

in earnest? What new caprice was this? She turned from him in silent misery, and then turned back again.

“It is all over—all over! You must go away! I cannot marry you!”

He frowned and fixed almost savage eyes on her.

“What now?” he cried. “Is it this new man—this man you made an appointment with last night? How dare you speak to me like that? Do you think I will let you off? You are *bound* to marry me, and you must.”

She hung her head and looked like a chidden child.

“Yes, scold me,” she said; “I like it.”

“I will scold you enough,” he said, almost smiling, “if you are silly and childish.”

“I am not silly and childish, I wish that I were; I never shall be again.” And she wrung her hands pitifully. “Oh! it is no use your looking like that: looks cannot move me, or words either. I may not marry you.”

“You may, and you must.”

“No, I will not.”

“You will not marry me! You dare to

look me in the face and to tell me that you will not marry me?"

He seized both her wrists as he spoke and forced her to look at him.

Was this Freda, this slight, pale woman, who looked full at him with sorrowful, shining eyes? Was this Freda?

"It is no use," she said.

"What is the meaning of this change? When did it take place? Why were you so gay at dinner? Had you given me up then, or are you all a lie?"

"I am *not* a lie!" she cried with excitement; "it is because I am not a lie that I give you up. I meant to marry you when I came in to dinner; I did not when I left the room."

He had still hold of her wrists till she spoke thus, and then he cast her from him almost with violence.

"Do you think I want you now?" he cried.

"I cannot help it," she said softly.

"And you will not tell me the reason?"

"No, I will not tell you the reason."

"It was that man you met last night."

Her head again sank forward ; she clasped her hands, that fell in front of her, together ; her breast heaved beneath her pretty evening dress. She was the picture of dejection, of despair, and yet so young, so lovely, that a man's heart might well break in the giving her up.

“Come back to me, Freda! come back to me!” he cried vehemently, and opened his arms to her. “There is love, indulgence, pardon here. You do love me, you must love me! Come back to me, Freda!”

She raised her hands with that movement he knew so well, and his heart felt torn to pieces as he looked at her and saw there was no relenting in face or attitude ; only a protest against the arms he had opened to her, the bosom on which he would have let her lie.

“Percival,” she said, in a voice so strained and sad he would not have known it was hers, “perhaps some day I may explain all ; I cannot now, I dare not! Go away and forget me! Thank God you did not marry me!” And she shuddered as she spoke. “Oh, Percival! I might have married you, but your own words fixed both our lives. A

woman who deceived you was *unpardonable*.”

Her voice had caught the tone of his as she quoted the word, and she seemed to shiver and sway under some burden too heavy for her slender form to bear, after she had uttered it in a lower key, but with almost as much force as he had used.

“And you have deceived me!” he cried, his pale face glowing, his eyes on fire. “After all, through all, you have deceived me! Fear me not!” And he raised his arm authoritatively. “Marry you—pah! I cast you off as the vilest thing alive—a faithless woman!”

He flung his arms out as if casting her off indeed, while his gesture and countenance alike expressed a contempt beyond what any words could utter. Then, with an intense calmness, whether real or assumed, he turned from her and left the room.

Left Freda standing there alone, quite alone, and looking like a drowned creature to whom real life had not yet come back. She remained motionless on the same spot till she heard the house-door shut below, and then she sank slowly down just where she had

stood, and lay in a heap on the floor. She did not faint, yet she did not feel alive. She scarcely thought, and yet knew that of all earthly creatures she was most miserable. Life seemed fading out of her in some strange, unknown manner, and she had only one conscious hope, and that was that she was dying.

She never knew how long she lay there. Indeed, no one ever knew. Afterwards she sometimes almost believed that she had fainted or slept; it seemed to her so impossible that she had voluntarily remained there so long, and had been so long ignorant of conscious thought. But the poor child neither fainted nor slept in reality; body and mind were both stunned, but they were still alive.

Corabel, meantime, had slept soundly, and had, according to a common phrase, slept her headache off. She woke refreshed and cheerful, and entirely unconscious of the misery that was so near her. How strange it is that those who love dearly so often should have no spiritual consciousness of the joys or sorrows of their absent beloved ones.

Corabel, when wide awake, looked at her watch, and was a little shocked to see how

late it was. She felt that she was acting chaperon but badly, and had left the lovers too long *tête-à-tête*. So she smoothed her hair and the soft folds of lace round her neck, and made herself look as nice and neat as she could ; and it was a sweetly-finished and refined figure she saw reflected before her in the long mirror as she tripped out of her bedchamber and entered the drawing-room.

There lay Freda in a heap just as we described her at the moment that the house-door shut.

Corabel did not see her instantly, for she glanced first at the sofa and then at the window, expecting to find two figures there ; and it was only when this expectation was disappointed that her eyes searched the room and beheld Freda on the floor.

At first she did not believe that she saw what she did see, but that unbelief was only for a second, and then she gave a loud scream.

She ran up to her. "Freda," she cried, "get up !" and she took hold of her and raised her.

Freda seemed to have partly lost the use

of her limbs, or else the will to use them; and she gave Corabel very little assistance, and stared helplessly forward with wide-opened blank eyes, like a somnambulist. She stood where Corabel had placed her, but did not attempt to stir; and when Corabel put her arm round her she allowed her to lead her to the sofa.

“Where is Mr. Percival?” cried Corabel.

“He is gone,” said Freda, and there was no more meaning in her voice than in her white, meaningless face.

“Gone!” repeated Corabel. “Oh, Freda, Freda! what is it? tell me what it is? Are you ill? is he coming back?”

Freda drew her breath with difficulty and gasped.

“No,” she said; “he is never coming back.”

“He has forsaken you? he is wicked! Oh, why is Lewes Underwood always right?”

“No,” repeated Freda in the same stupid manner, and still looking blankly forward; “it is I—it is not he—it is only I.”

“You? you don’t know what you say.”

Don't, Freda—don't speak so ! don't look so ! Look at *me*, Freda, and tell me what you mean."

But Freda did not look at her ; she kept staring forward as if she would never close her eyes again.

"It is all over," she said, but without any emotion. "He is gone—I sent him. He will not come back. It is all over."

"Freda, you *must* tell me. I will not bear it. You *shall* tell me ! Did you quarrel ? what happened ?"

"Did we quarrel ?" repeated Freda, a little wonderingly. "I don't know, Corabel. I don't think we quarrelled, but we have given each other up. It is over. Oh yes ! he was very angry—he was very angry."

Here she began to tremble, and held up her hands with that well-known gesture so often used in play or in pretty earnest, which made Corabel's heart thrill when she saw it, and the tears burst from her eyes.

Freda looked at her, and then put her hands to her own eyes.

"Why are you crying ?" she asked. "I am not."

“Oh, my darling!” cried Corabel, while the tears flowed rapidly down her cheeks, “I wish you were; do, my Freda! But never mind, it will all come right; he will return—you have only quarrelled.”

“No, Corabel; he will never come back. I will not let him. It was I sent him away, and I will never, never let him return!”

“But why, Freda? why?”

Poor Corabel was half beside herself with pity, wonder, and terror, and an eager desire to understand what had happened, and how matters could be set right again.

“I cannot tell you. Don’t ask me. I cannot tell you.”

“But it will come right again, dear Freda; surely it will come right again. You have only quarrelled—tell me that you have only quarrelled. Freda, why do you not speak?”

She spoke even angrily in her eagerness, but Freda remained in the same state—stupid, unemotional, stunned.

Then, for the first time, she turned her eyes on Corabel, and saw her—those lovely eyes that now had a wild weird look in them. A sort of smile, giving the most

piteous expression imaginable to her small white face, passed over her lips.

“Corabel,” she said, “I think I am dying.”

“Come to bed,” cried the other, still almost angry from the extremity of her distress. “Oh, come to bed. Why do we stay here? You will get well in bed—you will sleep—and in the morning all will look so different.”

Freda answered not a word, but allowed Corabel to guide her, like one who leads a blind person, to her room, and there to undress her and put her to bed, where she lay looking very young, and small, and white, still with wide-opened eyes, gazing blankly forward into space.

Corabel asked her no more questions, but treated her as if she was ill. When she first touched her she started back at the deadly coldness that met her touch; so she ran away and brought her some hot tea to drink, and Freda drank it meekly, as if she had been a child or an imbecile, with no will of her own.

Then Corabel made a bed up for herself

on the sofa and undressed, stealing furtive glances from time to time at Freda to see if any colour was coming back into her cheeks, or if only—only her eyes had closed. Oh, if she would only shut her eyes !

Before she lay down on the sofa Corabel knelt by Freda's bed and said her prayers out loud, in a soft soothing voice ; then she read in the same way a few verses from the Bible, and then she kissed her.

Freda kissed her in return, to her surprise and joy, and said, but still in the same dull, hopeless way : “ Pray again, Corabel ; pray for strength to bear.”

So Corabel prayed again very earnestly, softly, and reverently.

She slept little enough that night. She was always watching Freda, always stealing to the bedside to see if those lovely eyes were shut, or were still staring wide open in that dreadful manner. Alas ! Freda's eyes were never closed ; and Corabel, in mute impatience, almost persuaded herself that she was sleeping with them open.

Corabel's thoughts and fears tormented her all night. What could it mean ? what

could they have quarrelled about? Would all be well in the morning, and Freda be the first to laugh at her exaggerated misery over a lover's quarrel? Then she remembered the fever that was abroad in S—, and how Freda had been out all day, and the almost unnatural brilliancy of both her beauty and her conversation at dinner. Had Freda caught the fever? Was this how she was sickening with it? Had there been no quarrel with Mr. Percival? Had he for some reason left early, and Freda been taken ill afterwards; and was separation—this idea that it was all over and he would never come again—only the hallucination of her diseased brain? Ought she to have sent for a doctor at once? Would she be much worse in the morning?

Then Corabel stole once again softly to the side of Freda's bed. Outside on the coverlet lay the poor pretty little hand with the circlet of gold on one finger, that golden talisman that had bound her to the man she did not love and then left her unprotected on the world. Very gently her fingers sought the wrist, and she counted weak, fluttering

pulsations that did not seem to her to tell of fever ; so with a partially-relieved mind she returned to her sofa, and towards morning Corabel slept.

She woke with a great start and the horrible waking sensation of a new grief. When she saw where she was, instead of being in her own room, she remembered everything, and with a feeling of guiltiness at having slept at all, she softly rose and ran to Freda.

To her inexpressible relief and comfort she found that Freda was asleep. Her eyes were shut, and she slept as placidly as a child. Corabel felt as if, had her eyes still been opened, she *could* not have borne it.

It seemed to her impossible but that Mr. Percival would call before long ; and surely with true love in both their hearts, it would not take many words or looks between them to set matters straight again. Surely if she told him of the state in which she had found Freda he would forgive anything ; surely when Freda woke to the new day she would only wake to be forgiven.

Cheered by these thoughts, Corabel dressed

herself without making any noise, left the room on tip-toe, and went down to breakfast.

Mr. Percival had spent a miserable night. He had not gone to bed at all, but had paced the shore for hours, and then slept the sleep of one worn out in mind and body on the sofa, where he hastily flung himself when he reached his home. Bitterer or more miserable thoughts have seldom distracted the soul of any man till he slept, and his waking was only the more terrible on account of lovely dreams that had attended his short slumber: dreams in which Freda was his wife, and they loved each other.

His breakfast was almost untasted, and he left the house early. There were two things he intended to do; one of these was more difficult than the other, but neither was perfectly easy. He wished to call on and speak to the man whose appearance in S—— he could not help connecting with Freda's extraordinary conduct; and he wished to see Corabel alone and discover if she could throw any light on what had happened. The first of these wishes was the least easy to carry out, because he neither knew the

name nor the residence of the stranger ; but to see Miss Bell alone might be a little difficult also, with Freda in the house. Freda herself he angrily determined not to see again till he in some degree understood the meaning of her behaviour.

Mr. Percival was not a man to be daunted by difficulties ; whatever he intended to do he almost always did, and he was determined that these two things should form no exception to his general rule.

The first thing he did was to pay Benjamin a visit, in order to learn whether Freda was due there any hour during the day, as, if she was, he would at that hour find Corabel alone ; and he went early in order to avoid the possibility of meeting Freda herself.

Benjamin's mother told him that Mrs. Fane was not coming that day ; she had been a long time there yesterday, bless her sweet face ! and had brought a new doctor to see Benjamin. A doctor who cured in some wonderful way by what he called *in-ale-ing*, though not one drop of beer had she seen ; but he brought a thing with a 'andle

and a spout, and a long tube like, and he worked the 'andle like the 'andle of a pump, and then he said Benjamin inaled. Such a time he stayed, and Mrs. Fane too, and took as much trouble as if Benjamin had been the Pope on his throne. They came at ten minutes past twelve, and didn't go away again till after two by the clock.

Mr. Percival was extremely startled at this. Between twelve and one—a new doctor—Benjamin—could that have been the appointment? the harmless, innocent appointment? But if so, why had she not told him? and in what way could it have influenced her subsequent conduct?

He asked very anxiously what the new doctor was like.

The reply was that he was a young man with a high colour, a hooked nose, black hair, and the beautifulest white teeth he had ever seen in his life.

Certainly this description answered to the appearance of the stranger, and Mr. Percival felt relieved, though at the same time more bewildered than before.

Had she heard his name?

Yes ; Mrs. Fane called him Mr. Beverley.

Percival left the cottage, giving a golden coin as he did so, for Benjamin, and carrying away many a blessing from Benjamin's mother. He walked rapidly to the hotel, and asked if Mr. Beverley was staying there.

"Yessir ; left this morning by the express —9.15."


"Was he coming back?"

"Nosir—not as I knows of ; paid his bill and took his traps with him."

Mr. Percival experienced a sensation of relief. He had no desire to see Mr. Beverley or enter into an explanation with him, if Freda's safety could be secured without his doing so ; and a little of the dreadful weight on his mind was lightened by the "yessir" and "nosir" of the waiter. The most difficult of his self-appointed tasks was not only difficult but impossible, not only impossible but unnecessary. Now he had to see Corabel, but he must wait till the day was a little older for that purpose. No ; why should he ? The girls would have finished their breakfast before this. The dining-room,

therefore, would be vacant, and he could ask to see Miss Bell alone there. Then a sudden chill came over him. Suppose Miss Bell's headache was as severe as it was last night. Suppose she was in bed and too ill to rise and see him. Horrible supposition! must he wait there without making the least effort to learn his fate? must he dance attendance on Miss Bell's headache and let Freda—his Freda—go her wilful way till Miss Bell's headache had departed? Mr. Percival gnashed his teeth while these ideas took possession of his mind, and hurried along with rapid steps from the hotel to the Terrace.

There he inquired, not for Mrs. Fane, but for Miss Bell, whereat the servant stared and seemed disposed to grin also, while she informed him that Mrs. Fane had not got up that day, and that Miss Bell was uneasy-like about her, and said that if she did not get better and take her victuals, she must send for the doctor. With impatient strides Mr. Percival entered the dining-room, and commanded the girl to send Miss Bell to him at once. When Mr. Percival was excited, he



always ordered everybody about as if he was every one's king.

Corabel kept him waiting some minutes—hours they seemed to him—and at last, unable to bear suspense and delay any longer, he rang the bell and sent for her again.

Then she came to him, very pale and anxious-looking.

“What is it all?” he cried, almost roughly in his great painful eagerness; “what does it mean?”

“Nay, it is you I must ask that!” she answered; and if he was rough, her eyes grew angry as she looked at him. “What have you done to her? Why have you broken her heart?”

“I? her heart?” he cried passionately; “has she a heart to break? And what of me? what of my heart? am I to be twice wrecked by a woman?”

“Was it really all her doing? and why did she do it?”

“It was really all her doing, and I have not the faintest idea why she did it! She refused to give any explanation, and she

broke off our engagement ; I came to you for light !”

“ I can give you none ; she will not say anything, and she is very ill.”

“ Ill ! is she ill ?”

“ Yes ; she neither eats nor speaks, but lies like a dead creature ; only she has wide-open eyes that are for ever staring at nothing.”

“ And you allow this !” he cried with indignation ; he was so glad to be angry at something, and to blame somebody. “ You allow her to die before your eyes, and do nothing for her ? I do not then. I had the right to take care of her yesterday, and I will not give it up to-day. I will fetch a doctor.”

“ Pray do,” said Corabel quietly, more quietly than she felt ; but she was provoked at his scolding her. “ I am sure it will be the wisest plan.”

“ And she has given you no explanation whatever ?”

“ None at all ; but it is all very odd, Mr. Percival, very odd, and extremely unpleasant. You must excuse me for saying so, but we

know nothing of you—you are a stranger to us; and though you have engaged yourself to this woman we all love so dearly, you have told us—you have told her nothing. Your own conscience will know whether there is anything she can have discovered about you which may make her wretched, and yet determine her to break off the engagement. That is the only explanation that offers itself.”

She looked keenly at him. He met the gaze full with his dark, deep eyes, but his face crimsoned all over, up to the roots of his hair.

“Before God there is not!” he cried out solemnly. “Nothing—nothing. But I have a great mind to tell you——”

He advanced a step towards her, and it was now his turn to look keenly into her eyes. Something in his thrilled her with an almost uncontrollable fear, an indescribable nervousness of a nature to which Corabel was a stranger. She drew back when he stepped forward, and could hardly keep herself from begging him not to speak, when the servant came quickly into the room, saying that Mrs.

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Fane had roused up, seemed very ill, and was calling for Miss Bell.

The two looked at each other in a scared way, either at the interruption occurring at such a minute, or at its cause; then Mr. Percival said he should instantly fetch a doctor, and Corabel ran upstairs to Freda's room.

She was lying still in her bed, her face whiter than the pillow that surrounded it, her little hands clasped before her, her eyes moving restlessly about; they fixed themselves on Corabel as she entered, and she uttered a little cry.

"Don't leave me," she said pitifully; "you won't leave me, will you?"

"Never, my darling," cried Corabel, kissing her; "I will never leave you."

"Which of them shall I belong to in heaven?" said Freda in almost a whisper that made Corabel shiver.

"What do you mean, dear?" she said very calmly.

"I am his wife, and I love the other. Oh! which shall I belong to?"

"Hush! darling, we know there are no marriages in heaven. We can tell nothing."

“ Oh ! but those were the marriages without love ; is it so there ? Is it love that joins us there ? Then I shall be his. I am going to die very soon, you know, Corabel ; and I am so glad, so glad that I shall be *his*.”

It was curious that as soon as his presence there would be inconvenient, Freda had at once located her husband's soul in heaven ; but Corabel was rather glad of this than otherwise, for Freda's previous doubts on that subject had always shocked her.

“ It worried me very much,” said Freda, “ but I think it is love that will signify, not being married. Oh ! Corabel, I wonder, when I am dying, if I might just see him once more—do you think I might ?” she added wistfully. “ I don't mind one bit its being improper, but would it be *wrong* ? I don't want to be wrong.”

“ My dearest, you may see him whenever you like ; it will be thoroughly proper and perfectly right. But don't talk about dying, dear ; you are not going to die, and I have sent for a doctor to make you quite well.”

“ Oh ! but you mustn't do that,” she re-

plied anxiously. "I have to die—I couldn't live now, you know—how could I? It would be too horrible—too horrible. No, Corabel, I must die now, and it is best so; then I shall never have any more sorrows, or do anything wrong. I shall never cry, and I am so miserable, so very, very miserable, dear Corabel, that my heart is breaking. I do think I am dying of a broken heart."

"Don't talk so! You are *not* dying! But what *is* the matter? What makes you miserable? He has not an idea what it means. Freda, dear Freda, do tell me—do tell me why you are so unhappy?"

Freda wrung her hands.

"Can I tell you? Must I tell you?" she cried. "Stoop down—stoop down, nearer, nearer, while I whisper. It is too dreadful to speak out loud. Stoop nearer still, Corabel."

Corabel tremblingly stooped down over her, and Freda's white arm stole round her neck.



CHAPTER XI.

THE END.

BUT at that moment a sudden sharp knock sounded at the door.

It seemed as if Corabel was to be, on that day, for ever on the eve of hearing secrets, which were *not* to be revealed to her.

After the knock, appeared the servant; a man's figure was behind her, and she had only time to say, "Dr. Williamson," before the doctor followed her into the room. Corabel was obliged to turn away from Freda's encircling arms, and Freda lay white and very still.


Dr. Williamson advanced to the bedside,
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and after a few preliminary words from Corabel about sudden illness, no power of taking food, extreme weakness, etc., etc., proceeded to examine his patient. After a few minutes so spent, during which Freda might be said to be perfectly passive, he called for hot water and brandy, and made her swallow a wine-glassful; then he prescribed beef-tea and chicken-broth, with Liebig in it, at short intervals during the next twenty-four hours, unless she was willing to take solid food. She might be tried with that, but not forced or pressed to eat it; and she was to drink brandy-and-water or wine, whichever she liked, freely. He would call again in the evening, and would soon set her to rights.

He spoke briskly and cheerily to the patient, and to her anxious nurse, and then took his leave of the former, signing to the latter to follow him from the room.

Corabel felt a great qualm of fear at her heart as he did so, but followed him instantly and noiselessly. He closed the door, and did not speak till they were in the sitting-room.

“What is it?” he said. “You know more than I do, and it is difficult to prescribe in



the dark. She has had a great shock of some sort or other : a mental one, I take it, though a railway accident might account for her state."

"If anything, it is mental ; but I don't know *what* it is. I must tell you all, I suppose. She was engaged to be married, and yesterday evening she broke off the engagement. I had no idea she was going to do so. He had dined with us ; I had left them alone. When I came back he was gone, and she has been in this state ever since."

"They quarrelled, I suppose. Do you think it can be set right ? I must not conceal from you that she is in an alarming state of prostration. I think I shall carry her through, but it is touch and go ; and a reaction of joy—matters being all comfortably settled again—would be a wonderful help, and do far more for her than I can do, or beef-tea and brandy either."

"The whole thing rests with her ; *she* broke it off. *He* is devoted to her. I think she was going to tell me all about it when you came in."

"Well, don't bother her to tell anything,

unless she likes it. If they can be brought together again, she will get well ; if not, it will be harder work to pull her through, but still it is to be done. She is very delicate and fragile, with a sensitive nervous system ; and she has sunk altogether under some very severe shock. Just carry on as I told you ; if she gets alarmingly weaker, send for me ; if not, I won't come till evening."

Corabel felt almost stunned when the doctor left her ; the idea of danger had never for one moment presented itself to her mind, and that it was really there, actually present and imminent, filled her with a terror and grief perhaps even more unbearable, because it stunned her, and she scarcely understood it. She almost gasped for breath, and looked around her in a startled way, as if she expected to see that the world itself had changed, in those few dreadful moments.

How to save her—that was the only tangible thought—how to save her ; her being happy or miserable seemed now of little importance compared with the fact of her being at all. If she would only tell her why she had dismissed her lover, surely,

surely all could be set right. With a love such as Mr. Percival's, Freda must be happy. But the doctor said she was only to tell her secret if she wished it herself, so Corabel could not dare press her. She must calm and steady herself, or she would not be fit to return to her, or able to endure, without injury to Freda, all that might now lie before her. Rapidly and fervently Corabel prayed for help and strength, and then resumed her place in her friend's room.

Freda's eyes were closed, and she thought that she slept. Then Corabel began to revolve mighty things in her mind. Freda had asked whether it would be wrong to see Mr. Percival again. Freda thought she was dying—alas! when she had spoken the words, how little had Corabel believed them, or even thought that Freda herself really believed what she said; but talking of dying, she had hoped to see Mr. Percival once more. If she woke now refreshed, if she took nourishment, if she got a little stronger, Corabel could bring him to her; and while she lay there ill and unhappy, and he would

gladly give his own life to save hers, surely two hearts that so loved, must understand each other ; and the joy Dr. Williamson spoke of would give back the old Freda to them—wild, beautiful, and good. “ Yes, good, my darling,” whispered Corabel above her ; “ I believe you are far better than I am, though I am accounted wise, and you foolish.”

Presently Freda opened her eyes, and obediently swallowed the prescribed remedies.

“ You know I am dying, dear,” she said ; “ that man told you so, when he looked, and you followed him. I am sure I may see Percival, and I should like to tell him. Corabel, kind Corabel, will you bring him, and leave him here a little little while ?”

“ Indeed I will. But you are going to be quite well, my silly love. You will just make it up with him ; and you only want to be happy, to get well. The doctor said so— Be a wise woman, and let this man, who loves you so, make you happy.”

“ *Let him !*” said Freda in a strange bitter voice. “ Is it *I* that prevents him, then ? Oh, you little know !”

“ I dare say he is downstairs waiting, poor fellow ! to hear how you are. Shall I see ? Shall I bring him to you if he is ? ”

Freda looked at her wistfully, but was silent. After a little while she said in a very low voice :

“ Yes, Corabel, bring him here, if he will come. ”

Corabel ran down the stairs, and there, at the foot of them, she found Mr. Percival waiting. She was sure, from his pale face and anxious eyes, that he, too, had heard Dr. Williamson's opinion, or at least, that much of it, which showed that Freda was in danger. Perhaps even more, if Dr. Williamson's wits had been keen enough to perceive that Mr. Percival was the lover who might restore to Freda, not happiness alone, but life itself.

“ Will you come and see her ? She wants to see you, ” said Corabel.

“ Is she worse ? ” he asked hoarsely.

“ No—no—she is not worse ; but she thinks herself very ill, and wishes to see you. Will you come ? ”

“ Will I ? ” he asked passionately, and followed Corabel to the room.

She left them alone, going into the dressing-room, and letting the door remain open between, so as to be ready to join them if wanted, though she took care to place herself so that she could not hear what they said.

Freda's voice was low and faint, and only to be distinguished by one near her.

“ You have come, ” she cried ; “ it cannot be wrong, for I am dying. ”

“ You are *not*, ” he began, with excitement.

Then as he saw her poor white face and fallen features he restrained himself, and spoke with extreme gentleness :

“ Tell me, Freda, how could it be wrong for you to see me ? ”

She looked at him, and her eyes dilated, while an expression of terror came into her face.

“ He is alive ! ” she whispered.

He thought her mind was wandering, and soothed her tenderly.

“ Do not mind, my darling. No one shall do you any harm. ”

“My husband is alive !” she repeated with rapidly uttered words, in a strange rasping whisper.

Then he understood it all.

He looked at her, and there was almost as much terror in his face as in hers.

“Oh, Freda !” he said at last ; “do you hate him so very much ?”

She hardly seemed to understand him.

“I love you,” was her only answer. Then suddenly the tears that had been unshed since she had heard the dreadful fact, burst from her eyes and streamed down her pretty pale cheeks. His heart bled to see them, ignorant that perhaps those very tears had saved her reason. He knew not what to say, or how to comfort her ; and his own eyes, that had not known tears since boyhood, became wet as he beheld hers.

The power of speech was restored to Freda by that burst of weeping which so wrung his heart. She felt better, and relieved, though as miserable as ever.

“I thought, perhaps, all might go on,” she said, “for a little, little minute. I thought, perhaps we need not mind, and that if he

never came— I was wicked, but I do think it was only that I was bewildered, and that I couldn't see." Then tears flowed in refreshing rivers, and she stopped till able to speak again. "You said that deceit was unpardonable." She actually spoke the word with emphasis. "But you will pardon it, dear. I never should have carried it on. I would not have been wicked. I thought I would not tell you that he was alive, for fear you should give up loving me; but I did what was right, and it broke my heart. I am dying, Percival. Don't you think you might kiss me once?"

He kissed her with the same gentle tenderness with which a mother might kiss a sick babe.

"My darling," he said, "you do love me very much?"

"Yes, dear," she said; "I am dying, so I may."

"Would you love me whatever I was? if I had a different name? if I was another man? would you love me still, Freda—would you?"

She smiled at him—she, who had thought

never to smile again—gave him one of her old radiant smiles.

“ I would if you were *any* one,” she said ; it was not clearly expressed, but I think I know what she meant.

“ But suppose you had once hated me, and that I had not known you or loved you aright, but that I was quite changed—quite, and would lay down my life for you, could you love me, Freda ? *could* you leave off hating me ? could you believe that you had mistaken me, as I had you, and love me for the sake of what I am now, and forgive me, and forget that you had once hated me ?”

She looked at him wonderingly, and in the new ideas he brought before her, momentarily lost sight of the fact that she was miserable, and must not love him at all.

“ Of course I could,” she said. “ It would be you, and that is enough.” Then suddenly she felt he must have *some* meaning in what he said, though she was far from perceiving what it was. “ What *can* you mean ?” she cried.

“ I am afraid to tell you ;” and his voice trembled and his hands trembled—the strong brave man was actually afraid ; “ it may be great joy or greater misery. It rests with you—with you entirely, my Freda. Oh, will you not let it be joy ?”

“ What do you mean ?” she repeated.

“ I do not think we need be miserable. I think we may be happy, if you will it so ; but I am so afraid—so afraid. Shall I tell Corabel first ?”

“ Tell *me* !” cried Freda, with a touch of her old imperiousness.

“ I said I could not pardon deceit—I was an arrogant fool. Can *you* pardon it ? Can you pardon a man who has deceived you ?”

Before Freda could speak, Corabel had re-entered the room with food and wine, and insisted on her partaking of them. She was astonished at the change in Freda. The copious weeping, and then the excitement of this strange conversation, had perhaps produced the reaction, her doctor so much desired ; but there was life in her eyes and a faint tinge of colour in her cheeks.

“Now,” Corabel said, “you have talked long enough ; she will be tired.”

“No,” said Freda, “I am not tired. He has something to say to me. Go away, dear—it is very tiresome of you to come.”

Freda was apparently getting well, and spoke like the old Freda.

When Corabel had left them, Mr. Percival addressed her calmly and seriously.

“You are very miserable,” he said ; “you are ready to die, for fear of your future life. You will perhaps, therefore, accept a trouble, a trial of some kind, if it was less than the dreadful misery you fear.”

“Oh ! Percival, I love you, and we must part. But I see what you mean. You think that he will not claim me ! Oh ! I know that we shall always be separated—he and I—but you and I will be separated too.”

“It is not that I mean, Freda ; it is something very different. Suppose your husband——”

“Oh !” she cried, in her old pettish way, “don’t speak of him ; I can’t bear the sound of his name.”

This was not very encouraging, but Mr. Percival drew a deep breath and went steadily on.

“Suppose,” he said, without again mentioning the obnoxious word husband, “that he had repented and changed, and felt that he had not been kind to you, and that you and he had misunderstood one another, and that he—he came to you in some way that you should not know him——”

“I should always know him,” she interrupted, with a shudder.

“And that he thus made your acquaintance, and was once more your lover, and wooed you till you loved him——”

“Love *him!*” she cried quite angrily.

“Oh! Freda! Freda! let me speak. Just suppose all this; what would you do, when the man you loved, and who loved, recollect—loved *you* with the whole force of his being—told you that he was that other unhappy man whom you had vowed to love, but hated, what would you do Freda—what would you do?”

She lay staring at him in speechless amazement. Some faint, distant, vague

glimmer of what he meant, began to dawn on her.

He saw it, and from mere fear was almost ready to unsay what he had said, to turn her thoughts into another channel, and tread out the spark ere it sprang to flame ; but he resisted the temptation, and went bravely on.

“ What was his Christian name—your husband’s Christian name ? ” he asked her.

“ Lionel,” she said faintly and wonderingly.

“ Yes, but he had another name—a second name ; he dropped it in his signature, for it was the name of an uncle who quarrelled with him. It may have slipped from your memory, but you will recall it now.”

“ I know ! ” she cried ; “ Percival, of course—Percival—and you—you—what does it mean ? What can it mean ? Oh, don’t tell me—don’t tell me ! ”

“ May I not tell you, my Freda, my beloved—my beloved who loves me ? May I not tell you ? Is my love worth nothing ? Is your love nothing either ? Must I go ? Will you send me away, because I am the husband who adores you ? ”

And then and there the whole thing came out—the mystery that Freda's eyes had been unable to penetrate was revealed to her—was laid bare before her in the full light of the warmest and tenderest affection.

Three times had Lionel Fane had to woo his wife : first as himself, secondly as another, thirdly as himself again. Twice he had been successful, was he to fail the third time ? It was an extraordinary position, and one into which it was not easy to settle down comfortably ; but Lionel's state of mind was too exalted to care about comfort, if Freda would only be content to settle down in it at all. For a long time she could not speak to him or look at him, and though he did not wonder at that, for something must be due to mere bewilderment and the difficulty of accustoming her mind to such an extraordinary change, he felt almost in despair. It was when he told her that she was perfectly free, that he would make no claim upon her, that their future fate was in her hands alone, that she gave the first distant hint, that it was possible she might not accept her freedom. He did not encroach on that hint, but told her he

could woo her for any length of time, and wait with unheard-of patience till he had won her.

“Oh,” she said, with a sort of groan, “we should have to be married again !”

This looked better, and Lionel patiently went over all he had felt and all he had done, hoping by a multitude of words to calm her, soothe, and gradually accustom her to the state of affairs. He told her how he had been left for dead after that accident in the wild Californian country, and how his death was reported in the papers ; how he had lain long ill, and, on his partial recovery, had joined some travellers who were going up the country ; and how he had been knocked up by travelling too soon, having been tempted to make a fatiguing journey, and lead a very hard life, and so had been ill again ; and for months, as one may say, lost to the world, lying where there were neither doctors, nor communication with the civilised part of creation. At last, some chance brought a traveller to the place, and among his things there happened to be an old newspaper, which Fane eagerly seized on, and devoured,

almost astonished, by remembering an existence of which newspapers formed a necessary part. Curiously enough, in this very paper there was an account of his own death, which it had been believed had taken place after his fall.

The only sensation excited in his mind by this, was terror of what Freda's fate might be. He had, when he became acquainted with the fact, been already dead so long that it was quite possible that she might have married again. If not, he must save her from such an act; but if she had, he felt himself capable of being an Enoch Arden for her sake, and of leaving her for ever, rather than place her in such a deplorable position as his reappearance would do. Had he merely wished to announce his resuscitation, writing would have been sufficient; but as he meant to die for ever to England, if she was married, the best plan he considered was to make a hasty journey home, and discover for himself what had happened. He never ceased travelling from the day he read of his death, till the day he found himself at S——, to which little town he had gone from the

busy port where the ship landed, as a quiet, out-of-the way place in its neighbourhood, where he could decide what was best to do. He thought at a watering-place hotel he would be sure to find files of old *Times* newspapers, going many months back, and so see if Freda's name appeared in that interesting column (next to the agony column) where marriages are announced. If he failed in this search, he thought he might write in a feigned hand to Lewes Underwood and ask if Mrs. Fane was yet unmarried, or certainly find some means or other, of ascertaining that important fact. It was a strange chance that took him to S—— at all, and another strange chance that brought him under the balcony where Freda stood, fresh and radiant, while his companion's conversation told him that she was still a widow.

“Then if I had married Mr. Percival you would have gone away,” she cried. “Oh! but I forgot; you couldn't, for you are he!”

Uncertain what to do, or how to act, irresistibly touched by the sight of her, he ran up to London for a few days, saw Mr. Crawford, his lawyer, to whom he could now dare to

reveal himself—from whom he learnt all there was to know, and procured as much money as he wanted.

“And when did your hair turn red?” asked Freda.

He answered the question by telling her that it was then he purchased the stage beard and wig in one, which disguised him so completely; and, in fact, more than half concealed his face. After which he returned to S—.

His object there was to watch Freda, and decide on what was best to do. But what he *did* was to fall in love with her over again, as passionately and far less selfishly than when first he wooed her. Her happiness was now the object of his life, but as she loved him as Percival so much, he trusted the day might come when that happiness might be secured by his flinging off his disguise. He had not had the least idea of offering to her so soon; but had hoped, after winning her affections, to gradually prepare her for the truth. On the night of the railway accident, however, his feelings had overpowered his judgment, and he had spoken, whether he would or no.

Freda heard all the story with only a few

slight interruptions, and when he had finished she was silent for a long time. At last she said : " Do go away."

He rose, doubtful, perplexed, anxious.

" I'm sure you have talked enough," she said ; " send Corabel."

Without a word he left her, and went straight to Corabel in the dressing-room.

" She knows all !" he cried.

" Why, what is there for her to know ?"

He did not attend to her, or understand her.

" Yes ! she knows all ; and I have not the least idea how she has taken it."

Then he saw Corabel's bewildered face, and said :

" Oh ! I beg your pardon ; I entirely forgot that you know nothing. What will you think of me ? How shall I tell you I am he—I am Lionel Fane—that hated husband of hers !"

" Oh dear no ! you are not," cried Corabel, on the impulse of the moment. " He is dead ; you know it ; and if you had not known it, how could you have offered to her and been engaged ?"

Then she stared at him, and said: "Oh! but then if that is true, there is only one of you. Oh, what can it mean!"

"I *am* he," he answered; "and how it is to end I know not. I have told her!"

"You have told her!"

"Yes; and she has taken it more quietly than I expected."

"But, oh! Mr. Percival, how very, very wrong of you to pretend to be dead! What might not have happened?"

"I did not. I never did—not for one minute. The minute I knew it I came home."

"But it was in the papers, and letters were written about it."

"I was left for dead, and knew nothing of what happened for months and months. The moment I read in an old newspaper that I was dead, I started for England."

"Well, you could not do more than that. But I can't understand it. You are not Lionel Fane—Lewes Underwood's old friend—Freda's husband! It is impossible."

"Happily or unhappily, as the case may be—I know not which it is yet—I am that very man."

“Corabel! Corabel!” cried a faint young voice from the inner chamber.

“I must go!” she said; “wait here.”

He caught her by the sleeve of her dress, detaining her for a second.

“Say all you can for me,” he whispered.

Corabel nodded her head, and entered the bedroom.

Freda was still sitting up in her bed, a colour in her face, her eyes shining.

“You have heard?” she said.

“Oh, Freda! is it not a good way out of all the difficulties?”

“But what are the difficulties?” asked Freda.

Then Corabel reflected that there were none; so did not know what to say.

“Only think if you had married him before he came home!”

“But I couldn’t if he is he.”

“But, indeed, Freda! it is a very good thing.”

“Corabel, I want you to tell him to go away.”

“Oh, Freda!”

“For a bit, you know. Let him go away

for a bit, till I understand it better, and can think. You *must* tell him. Let him go to Mr. Underwood ; they are the dearest friends. He can wait there till I know what to do with him."

The plan did not sound unreasonable, and Corabel thought that more could not be expected from Freda in the first shock and bewilderment.

"Yes," she said slowly, "I will tell him."

"And *do* get me something to eat, there's a dear," said Freda ; "I am famished."

Corabel glided back into the dressing-room.

"You are to go away to Mr. Underwood for a little time, till she is able to think about it. I really don't see how you can expect more, and I do really think it will all come right. She is sitting upright, which she has not done since she was taken ill ; her face is all life and colour, and she is desperately hungry."

They looked at each other with bright, surprised eyes.

"I really do think all will go well, and I wish you success with my whole heart."

She held out her hand to him ; he clasped it warmly, and then with a desperate longing at his heart to remain, he went obediently away.

Freda ate some chicken, and after that she had a sound sleep. When she woke it was late in the day, and she said she would get up. Corabel assisted her to dress, and she reclined on the sofa that was pushed into the dressing-room for her.

She spoke a little now and then, but only on common topics, and she lay a good deal with her eyes shut, evidently thinking. Corabel did not dare to approach the one subject that occupied both their minds, and on the whole but little was said between them. After she had been helped into bed again, she kissed Corabel three or four times very lovingly, clasping her arms round her neck. Corabel returned the embrace warmly, but neither spoke, and so they parted for the night.

The next morning Freda declared she was quite well, only not quite strong, and got up directly after breakfast. She went into the drawing-room, and settled herself in an easy-chair in the window. Then Corabel came and sat on a stool at her feet.

“Dear Freda,” she said softly, “will it not all end well?”

“I don’t know. Who knows the end of anything?”

“But you must let him come back soon, dear. The only plan is to get accustomed to him.”

“Why he’s been here all the time. If I’m not accustomed to him I never shall be.”

“But I mean accustomed to his being the other one.”

“Is it not wonderful, Corabel?”

“Wonderful; yes, *more* than wonderful, almost incredible—only it *is*.”

“Oh, Corabel, Corabel, who could have thought it!”

“Dear Freda, I do hope and believe and think you won’t mind it. I am sure he is very much changed. I really think he may not have been so much to blame as——”

“Changed! blame!” cried Freda. “Who wants him changed? Who blames him?”

“I don’t mean Percival, dear; I mean the other—your husband.”

“My husband is the noblest man on earth.

Think of what he has done, of how he behaved. He came home the instant he heard he was dead, for *my* sake ; and he would have left me, if he had found me married, rather than degrade and distress me. Yes, though he loved me then and always, he would have left me. Think, what a man ! Ah me ! ah me ! how can I ever be worthy of him !”

Her face glowed, her lips parted, her eyes shone ; she looked inspired.

Corabel burst into tears and cried heartily for a few seconds.

“ Oh, Freda, how glad I am ! how glad I am !”

“ And to think, Corabel, that I can now make up for the past, when I didn't understand him, and hated him. How I did hate him till I found he was the other, and then it all came over me like a flood ; and now I needn't feel any remorse about purgatory or anything. Oh, that is *nice*, Corabel. I needn't worry about his being dead.”

“ Do send for him back, Freda.”

Freda blushed a lovely rosy hue.

“ It seems quite improper unless we are

married again. That is a sell, Corabel, when I had actually planned my wedding dress; and now Maud will have all the pleasure and I none."

Freda had to explain to Corabel how she had learned that her husband was alive. It was from Mr. Beverley, whom she had taken to see Benjamin. He had just returned from Australia, where he had heard of Mr. Fane's supposed death, and how it had turned out not to be true; and Freda being pointed out to him as a gay young widow who had lost a husband in Australia, from whom she had been separated, and for whom she did not care; and seeing how much attention Mr. Percival was paying her, and being of a meddling disposition, he was glad to form the appointment with her and take upon himself the office of letting her know she was not a widow. He was a young doctor, fussy, and full of new inventions and cures; and something leading him to mention a particular machine for inhaling, that he had invented, and that was a sovereign cure for lung disease, Freda, excited by the idea, begged him to visit her sick boy, which he the more willingly

agreed to do, as it gave him the opportunity he wanted.


The S—— doctor was astonished when he visited his patient that day ; but amidst all his congratulations he still declared that Freda was not strong, and would require great care for some years.

At all events, she now recovered rapidly, and at the end of the week she sent for Lionel Fane.

The meeting between them was all happiness ; and as each felt keenly where they had been wrong in the past, as each had been tried by the fire of affliction, and purified in the trial ; and as the love which filled both their hearts, was now that unselfish true love that thinks more of the beloved than of the lover, we may surely believe that a very happy future lay before them.

They took a honeymoon tour, which to Freda, at least, was the first taste of true honeymooning she had had ; and they were present in the autumn, at the marriage of Maud Underwood and Arthur.

Corabel was there also, and acted as solitary bridesmaid on the occasion ; and during the



pleasant days before the wedding, the Vicar found occasion, and made the very best possible use of what he found, to persuade her that the love he bore her was one to which a woman might safely trust herself during her voyage through life.

When the good man joined the hands of his sister and of his friend together in the bonds of holy matrimony, he had the pleasure of knowing that, before very long, another clergyman would perform the same office for him and Anna Bell.

Freda was radiant in beauty and happiness, outshining both bride and bridesmaid; and glancing from time to time at her husband with eyes of saucy admiration, that compared him, not unadvantageously, with bridegroom and priest.

They left the church arm-in-arm when the knot was tied, and Arthur and Maud were man and wife.

“That is a happy marriage, I believe,” remarked Lionel Fane.

“Yes,” said Freda; “but I think Lewes and Cora’s will be happier yet.”

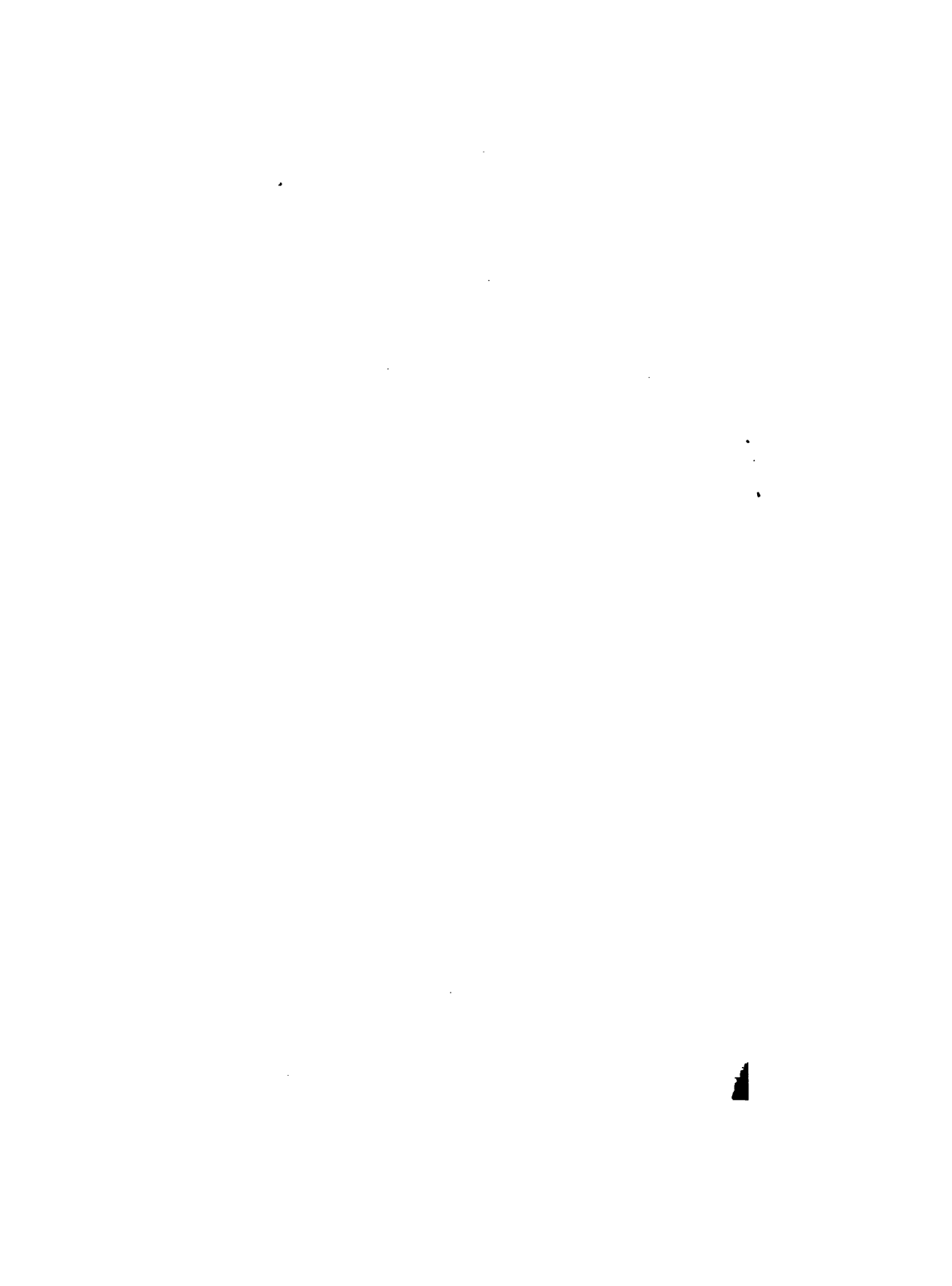
“And mine and yours happiest of all,” he said, smiling.

She smiled up into his face.

“Of course, dear, I had rather you were not alive,” she said sweetly ; “but since you are, I *am* glad you are he.”

THE END.





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